



Weeping Britannia
Portrait of a Nation in Tears
Thomas Dixon
Oxford University Press 456pp £25

I BEGIN THIS review with a confession. I am an inveterate weeper. I cry in the cinema, at television programmes and at the news. Music can leave me sobbing, as can school assemblies. I have also, shockingly, been known to bite back a tear in the archive, when I find a particularly moving story. I am also old enough to be embarrassed by this emotional incontinence and can usually be found trying to discretely wipe these tears away. Thank goodness, then, for Thomas Dixon's *Weeping Britannia* and its assurance that this unwelcome lachrymosity is part of a long tradition of tearfulness, one that far from being alien to British culture is a long-standing aspect of national identity. I come from a long line of weepers.

Dixon's enjoyable and scholarly work takes the reader on a tearful journey. He shows us that crying has its history, beginning with the story of Margery of King's Lynn, whose near constant weeping so annoyed her fellow pilgrims en-route to Jerusalem in the 15th century, to the more recent tears of Paul Gascoigne, Margaret Thatcher and endless contestants on television talent shows. After a 'stoical pause' between approximately 1875 and 1945, it is again widely considered an acceptable emotional response to a variety of events.

EXHIBITION



Artist and Empire
Facing Britain's Imperial Past
Tate Britain, until April 10th, 2016

THE BRITISH EMPIRE and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol closed in 2008 after only six years of operation. Attempts to revive it in London failed and its collections were donated to the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery. The chairman of its trustees, Neil Cossons, blamed the failure on 'post-imperial angst', commenting: 'I think the time has not yet arrived for the proper story of Empire and Commonwealth to be told.' After all, Bristol owes much of its past prosperity to the slave trade, while London's astonishingly multi-ethnic and multicultural make-up probably complicates the idea of an Empire museum beyond resolution. I am reminded of what post-colonial India's greatest artist, Satyajit Ray – director of the classic film about colonial Lucknow, *The Chess Players* – told me, as his biographer, when I asked him for his view of the British heritage in India. After a long pause for thought, Ray responded: 'It's a very, very complex, mixed kind of thing. I think many of us owe a great deal to it. I'm thankful for the fact that at least I'm familiar with both cultures and it gives me a very much stronger footing as a film-maker, but I'm also aware of all the dirty things that were being done. I really don't know how I feel about it.'

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Reflecting on the museum's demise in a thoughtful introduction to the lavish catalogue of Tate Britain's exhibition *Artist and Empire*, Alison Smith, the gallery's lead curator of 19th-century British art, observes that Britain has never had a museum of Empire, whether at London's Imperial Institute, established after

the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, or its successor, the now-defunct Commonwealth Institute. 'In Britain the art of Empire is generally presented in an illustrative and non-artistic way, in institutions governed by such disciplines as history, natural history, geography, archaeology and anthropology', she notes. Thus, much of what is displayed in *Artist and Empire* comes not from art galleries but from institutions such as the National Maritime Museum: 'In evoking the memory of the "imperial museum", this exhibition retains something of the polyglot culture that sustained the British Empire in the past and remains its most positive legacy.'

The range – geographical, chronological and cultural – is inevitably very broad, covering maps such as Matthew Flinders' chart of the coast of *Terra Australis* 1798-1803 (which defined Australia), botanical drawings from India and tribal objects from Africa (including Benin bronzes), as well as history paintings such as *The Death of General James Wolfe* by Benjamin West (1779), the Tate's portrait of *Colonel T. E. Lawrence*, in Arab dress, by Augustus John (1919) and artworks created as recently as 2015; for example, Andrew Gilbert's satirical installation with dummies of British soldiers as exotic as the Zulu warriors they are marching to attack.

Walter Crane's world map of 1886, *Imperial Federation*, highlights the Empire's complexity. At first glance, it looks like a straightforward celebration of imperialism, depicting the global spread of British dominion in pink, with a logo of Britannia at the bottom, sitting on the shoulders of the mythical figure of Atlas surrounded by stereotypical scenes of white-settler and native colonial life: three female figures at the top hold banners reading 'Freedom', 'Fraternity' and 'Federation'. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the females are wearing Phrygian caps, standing for revolutionary liberty, while some of the scenes, such as a bare-breasted Aboriginal woman proudly holding up a boomerang and a turbaned Indian porter, bent low beneath a heavy load, offer a less-than-imperial message. Crane, who was a socialist, created the map to promote a single federated state among the colonies of the Empire as an alternative to colonial imperialism.

Artist and Empire is an exhibition without a thesis – and is the better for it. It contains something for all tastes, whether the visitor prefers military heroism or subaltern studies. Overall it shows that British imperial exploitation could enrich the cultural experience of both the coloniser and the colonised.

Andrew Robinson

Catalogue: *Artist and Empire*, Alison Smith et al.
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