

“A Fit of Absence of Mind?”

Learning about British Imperialism in the 21st Century

The British Empire was instrumental in shaping the modern world as we know it. Despite its significance for today, controversies rage over how we should teach it to younger generations. Writing for *Frontier*, **Dr Adam D. Burns** discusses his recent investigations into the different educational factors influencing students’ perceptions of the British Empire.

The title of this piece quotes the Victorian historian J. R. Seeley, who wrote that Britain acquired its empire in a “fit of absence of mind,” a phrase that has arisen time and again over the years. However, the focus of my research is not to establish how or why Britain gained and maintained an empire, but whether those who live in Britain today are just as absent-minded in their understanding of British imperialism. As the historian, Antony Beevor, puts it: “Teaching the history of the British empire links in with that of the world: for better and for worse, the empire made us what we are, forming our national identity. A country that does not understand its own history is unlikely to respect that of others”. If this is indeed the case, then how students in British schools today come to understand empire is a question of substance, yet it is a question which up to this point has been largely regarded ideologically and rhetorically.

Controlling the Curriculum

When exploring the existing literature surrounding the teaching of History in schools in England (rather than British ones, due to the separate UK education systems), what becomes abundantly clear is that a grand debate recurs across the years concerning who exactly ‘controls’ the History curriculum. As the government of the day can manipulate education policy and the National Curriculum for separate subjects, one might say that they are able to control History. Such a power raises thoughts of Prime Minister (and historian) Winston Churchill’s famous words: “History will judge us kindly... because I shall write the history”. However, even if not all history books are written by politicians, there are many, particularly those in the more left-leaning media, who feel that politicians have

Not everyone loved the Empire: a painting depicts the flight of the Royal Horse Artillery from Afghan attack at the 1880 Battle of Maiwand



attempted to reform the History curriculum for ideological and manipulative purposes. When Michael Gove invited historian Niall Ferguson to help revise the History curriculum back in 2010, an article in the *New Statesman* stated bluntly that: “The Tories want our children to be proud of Britain’s imperial past”. Similar criticisms have been levelled more recently at Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has been accused of attempting to erase the darker side of Japanese imperialism from the history books. What many such commentators fail to acknowledge, however, is that a curriculum is not simply a syllabus for transmission to students, but rather a far more complex process open to a range of mediating influences, such as family, peers, teachers and the media, that occur between the writing of the curriculum document and the formation of a student’s understanding.

Surveying students and teachers

Although catalysed by the political debates surrounding the reforms to the History curriculum during the UK coalition government of 2010-2015, my research seeks to go beyond the ideological debate and put the question of how students come to understand imperial history to the students and teachers who deal with the subject on a day-to-day basis. Using a variety of methods, including questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, my study seeks to look more closely at core issues that the secondary literature has

raised. I have carried out this research with a number of sixth-form groups that study British imperial history in three different sites: a state sixth-form college, a state comprehensive school, and an independent school. The sorts of questions the study seeks to explore are those such as: How significant is imperial history given the multitude of other histories that are absent from the curriculum? How important is it in a post-imperial, multicultural Britain? What roles do modes of multifaceted mediation play in filtering students’ ideas of empire?

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Student reactions to portrayals of the British Empire

To begin with, questionnaires were distributed to students taking either AS or A Level History courses which focused on British imperialism. The questionnaires contained two images that prompted reflections from the students and what follows here is a variety of the students’ unfiltered responses.

Responses to “Negro Dance”

The first image provided to students was an 1836 Lithograph of West Indies plantation workers dancing, which elicited a wide variety of responses in answer to the question: “What does this source tell us about the nature of the British Empire?” Some students saw imperial subjects happy under British rule: ‘It shows

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An 1836 Lithograph depiction of plantation workers dancing entitled ‘Negro Dance’

the people celebrating which you can imply in terms of how the empire ruled it was good and liked,' 'This implies that the British Empire was not oppressive,' 'There appears to be no form of repression or sadness [sic] within this village, which differs from my previous thoughts upon the empire, a place I thought was doomed to failure'. Others suggested that the image represented the empire as a place that allowed colonised peoples to maintain their cultural/ethnic identity: 'This picture shows that traditions don't change with a new leader but it also shows that the white and blacks hadn't mixed,' and 'It shows that the Africans as part of the British Empire kept some of their traditional values'. However, many students saw in the image a strongly negative view of British imperialism: 'Non-British ethnicities living in a pitiable situation, meanwhile in the back of the image, there seems to be a rich/good house, making the contrast more remarkable,' 'Seems patronising to black people: British Empire patronised other races and belittled their ways/customs,' and 'This idea tells us that the nature of the British Empire was one to hold power over others by making them a lesser being than the British'.

Responses to an image of British officers

The second image provided to the students was an 1878 photograph of British officers most likely taken while on campaign in the Second Afghan War. Some saw the image as a projection of British strength and superiority: 'The nature of the British Empire seems to be a strong nation with a sense of superiority and power as the men are very well-equipped, the ones that are stood are standing tall and

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confident and the men in the background don't seem to be British and are standing far away watching British Glory,' 'The British Empire was all about its hierarchy, the image of the empire was important, and they ruled or put people in power that seemed to have the years and experience behind them,' and 'I think the British Empire relied an awful lot on their image as a whole and saw that as the most important thing'. Others saw the image as illustrating positive traits within the empire: 'You can imply from this the empire was good because they are looking after their officers. They also were proud by displaying their badges which shows they're happy to be involved in the empire, which again highlights it as a positive one,' 'The British empire appears to be united with both British and Indians in this picture working together,' and 'They were proud of what had been accomplished'. Again, however, there were those who saw the image as a primarily negative image of British imperialism: 'Only the pure white British were counted as British,' 'All white – being British meant you were white – not a multi-racial nation yet,' and '...the British didn't like the idea of having Indian people having the same status of power as they did'.



An 1878 photograph of British officers from the Queen's Own Guides

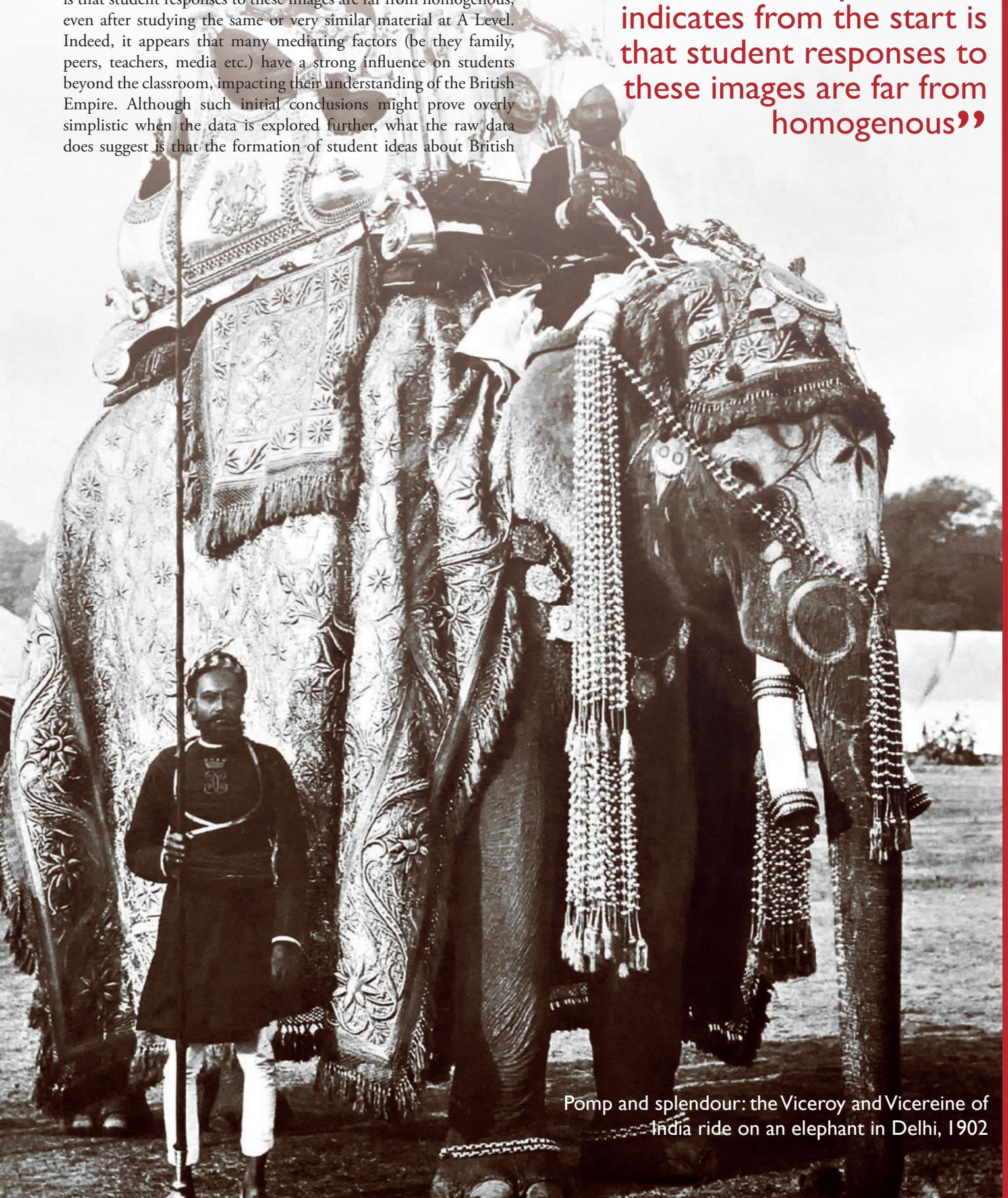
Adam D. Burns is the Head of History and Politics at Queen Elizabeth's Hospital in Bristol. He completed a PhD in History at the University of Edinburgh in 2010 and is currently studying for a part-time EdD in History Education at Leicester

Initial thoughts

Even from this very general selection of student responses regarding these two images, it is clear that students studying the same or similar History courses drew markedly different conclusions from visual materials that they had never encountered before. Variations in responses not only occurred between different schools, but within the schools themselves. Although in my final study the student data will be dealt with in a far more structured and analytical manner, what this very raw data indicates from the start is that student responses to these images are far from homogenous, even after studying the same or very similar material at A Level. Indeed, it appears that many mediating factors (be they family, peers, teachers, media etc.) have a strong influence on students beyond the classroom, impacting their understanding of the British Empire. Although such initial conclusions might prove overly simplistic when the data is explored further, what the raw data does suggest is that the formation of student ideas about British

imperialism is far more complex than a specified curriculum can account for. Whatever the reasons for this, there are clearly a range of influences between the designs of politicians and the realities of education that are often overlooked. My hope is that when further analysed and then compared with data from student focus groups, and interviews with teachers, my findings will provide some intriguing starting points for further investigation into how students understand the British Empire in the twenty-first century.

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Pomp and splendour: the Viceroy and Vicereine of India ride on an elephant in Delhi, 1902