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# Exploring an imperial region: North West England

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## Abstract

This paper considers the significance of geographical scale in the analysis of imperialism, making some suggestions for *regional* geographies of imperialism, and developing these with reference to themes and data sources relevant to the North West of England, and to a series of preliminary case studies undertaken by local geography students. The paper will interest those seeking to understand relationships between imperialism and the region, and to plan specific research projects concerned with imperialism in the English North West.

## Keywords

Imperialism, Regional geographies, North West England, Archive sources

## Imperialism and spatial scale: the region and the North West

This paper examines relationships between imperialism and the region with reference to the North West of England. In doing so, it aims to address wider debates about the geographical scales on which imperialism operates. More specifically, it also aims to situate and sketch out a research agenda for examining the imperial embroilments of this region.

Geographical studies of imperialism examine a number of spatial scales, from the nation to the home. The Blackwell *Dictionary of Human Geography* defines imperialism as 'The creation and maintenance of an unequal economic, cultural and territorial relationship, usually between states and often in the form of an empire, based on domination and subordination.' (my emphasis; Clayton 2000, 375). The tendency to privilege the nation and/or state in geographical understandings of imperialism, which this definition reveals, has not led to the exclusion of more local studies. On the contrary, a number of attempts have been made to examine imperialism at smaller scales. Driver and Gilbert's *Imperial Cities* (1999) reads many of the most prominent streetscapes and buildings of London and other European cities as tangible expressions of imperial pretension and ambitions. Others have shown how quarters of these cities, such as the City of London and the ports of London and Liverpool, played important roles in imperial circuits of capital, raw materials and finished goods (Jacobs 1996; Steel 1964). On a smaller scale still, imperialism reached into neighbourhoods and homes, both in terms of the styles and products that physically

constituted houses and gardens (Driver and Gilbert 1999), and also the acts of production, reproduction and consumption, in which homes played an important part (McClintock 1995).

But while geographers have begun to investigate some of the imperial processes that operate on sub-national geographical scales, their progress in this respect has been patchy. In particular, relatively little attention has been paid to imperialism at the regional level. Conventionally regarded simply and generically as 'a more or less bounded area possessing some sort of unity or organizing principle(s) that distinguish it from other regions' (Gregory 2000, 687), the concept of the region has been productively reworked in new regional geographies, to encompass 'partial, porous and entangled networks of social relations' and economic processes (Gregory 2000, 689). Jones (2001) argues that regions need not play second fiddle to nation states in geographical analyses, since they do not in reality. Arguably, the nation state must be decentred, or at least more fully complemented, not only in political and economic geographies of the present (Jones 2001), but also in those of the past. As a scale of geographical analysis – supra-national (Saravanamuttu 1986) or more conventionally sub-national – the region might therefore productively be extended to geographies of colonialism and post-colonialism. This would improve not only geographical understandings of imperialism, but also those of the region, and of particular regions.

The value of such an understanding may be academic, but never purely so. A research project, conducted by some high school students in Manchester,

illustrates the importance of understanding the imperial embroilments of a city or region. It also shows how actively researching this historical and geographical issue can help people – whether they be academics or amateur researchers, adults or children – to address the problems of living where they do. Students at Burnage High School in Manchester were motivated to examine questions of race and ethnicity in their school and its wider setting by the death of a boy, Ahmed Iqbal Ullah, at the school in 1986. An investigation of possible racial aspects of the incident found evidence of racism in the school, but also concluded that many students were unhappy with the didactic anti-racism that teachers imposed upon them, in the tense atmosphere that followed the killing. Some responded by forming a drama group, the Frontline Theatre Group, which researched and performed a play, *Struggle for Freedom*. This examined the life and work of Len Johnson, the son of African and Irish parents in Manchester, a boxer and black rights activist, who organised the first Pan-African Congress, which was held in Manchester in 1945. The project enabled Burnage students to produce a history of their own, and to situate themselves in relation to a wider geographical framework, encompassing Africa, the West Indies, and Ireland. The report stated that:

What struck us was that the students were using the play and its themes as a metaphor for their own lives and were learning about their own culture, about the significance of their friendships and relationships with each other at school and at home, about their attitudes to women and about race and class. (Macdonald 1989, 363)

In Johnson's biography, the students found evidence, not simply of wider forces being played out in Manchester, but also (and more positively) of two-way relationships, in which people in Manchester shape those forces, sometimes for the better. The project had used 'the experience of students to examine history, geography, humanities, art, and contemporary themes in students' lives' and it had illustrated 'the essential elements of good educational practice' (Macdonald 1989, 363). Arguably, it illustrated the essential elements of critically situated geographical research, whether in schools or elsewhere.

The remainder of this paper examines the recursive relationships between imperialism and one particular region, which was deeply and broadly embroiled in a complex and often contradictory set of imperial processes and relationships. Doing so it not only contributes to an analysis of scales at which geographies of imperialism operate, but also sets out a research agenda and offers some particular guidance for those interested in investigating this imperial region.

## **Investigations: themes and sources**

This section outlines a series of dimensions in geographies of imperialism, relates them to the regional context and specifically the English North West, and makes some specific suggestions regarding research methods and sources. As explained above, particular attention is paid to research that has been and can be done within the North West, rather than travelling to archives and libraries further afield. It should, however, be noted that national archives and libraries are may also be useful for research involving official and other publications (the British Library in London is particularly important); newspapers and magazines published throughout the British Empire (British Library Newspaper Library, Colindale); military, colonial and other governmental records (Public Record Office, Kew).

Religion played an important part in imperial outreach (Alderson 1998). In the North West, non-conformists were directly and indirectly involved in missionary activity, and in the planting of churches within and beyond the British Empire. Accounts and records of missionary work and in the administration of churches, for example in Sierra Leone and South Australia, are among the internationally important collections – including thousands of published items spanning the history of Methodism and related evangelical movements – of the Methodist Archives and Research Centre, which are held in the Deansgate building of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester.

Imperialism was structured in complex ways by contemporary norms of masculinity and femininity (Blunt 1994; Phillips 1997). People in the North West were to play some important parts in structuring the relationships between gender and imperialism – in intervening to shape both gendered forms of imperialism and also imperial constructions of gender. For example, Josephine Butler, a middle-class woman who lived for many years in Liverpool, campaigned on behalf of women, not only at home but also in British possessions including Ireland and India (Sharp 2002; Walkowitz 1980). The Josephine Butler Collections, held at the University of Liverpool Library, contain an important collection of publications, correspondence and private papers relating to her, which offer important insights into her feminist activism and critique of imperialism.

Imperial expansion and stability depended heavily upon military force and display (Mackenzie 1992). The military was organised, not simply along national lines, but

with distinct local and regional representation. The North West contributed to militarised imperialism, for example, through the Manchester Regiment of the British Army. Though many archives and sources on the regional military are kept at the Public Record Office in London, some important material on the Manchester Regiment, for example, can be accessed locally (Ardwick Green, Manchester). These archives include maps, papers, correspondence, regimental newspapers and gazettes, with extensive records on particular imperial conflicts, including the Boer War, for which the photographic collection is particularly strong.

The North West played an important part in the slave trade. Before abolition of the slave trade in 1808, Liverpool was the most important slave port in Europe (Cameron and Crooke 1992; Costello 2001), and even after abolition Manchester remained one of the most important centres for processing the products of slave labour – cotton (Ratcliffe 1982). Some important sources on Liverpool's slave trade and Manchester's cotton industry remain within the region, notably at the Merseyside Maritime Museum and Manchester Central Library respectively. Archives and publications relating to cotton mill workers and their unions may be found at the Working Class Movement Library (Salford Crescent, Salford), and at the Labour History Archive and Study Centre (People's History Museum, Princess Street, Manchester). Records relating to former slaves, who settled in Liverpool and formed one of the oldest black communities in Britain, may be found at the Liverpool City Records Office (St. James Parish Records) and throughout the archives and libraries of Liverpool. Forced and free migrations within the British Empire and then the Commonwealth can be researched in more contemporary issues and archives, including the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Archive (Oxford Road, Manchester) and, again, in the Labour History Archive and Study Centre (holdings on race relations and immigration).

Particular companies also played an important part in imperial outreach, not only through great monopolies such as the East India Company and Hudson's Bay Company, which were based in London and operated effectively as branches of the imperial state, but also through smaller companies, which were based in regional centres such as Manchester and were more focussed and modest in their overseas operations. For example, the Manchester-based trading company Paterson Zochonis (P. Z.) was 'a kind of West African Selfridge' with 'branches all down the coast, even in the republic [of Liberia]' (Greene 1936, 59); it was an important pillar of the colonial society and economy.

Other Manchester and Liverpool-based companies imported and exported commodities. Some, such as Lever Brothers in Merseyside, diversified into non-trading activities such as plantations in Africa and Asia, and thereby became directly involved in overseas colonisation schemes (Jones and Wale 1998). Records of imperial trading companies are held in numerous regional archives, including the Modern Records Centre in North Street, Liverpool, which has, for example, records of the Liverpool Warehousing Company and of the Corn, Sugar and Provision Trade Associations.

Of course, maritime imperialism depended upon shipping lines, which moved people and goods around the world. Regionally based shipping companies such as Elder Dempster connected Liverpool and, later, Salford with the world, and promoted, as well as served, imperial trade (Davies 1973; Hollett 1995; Cowden and Duffy 1986). Archives relating to the Port of Liverpool, held at Merseyside Maritime Museum, include the shipping records of Elder Dempster, the Pacific Steamship Navigation Co. and Lamport & Holt, as well as various shipping and trade associations; photographic collections, and the career and personal papers of seamen and passengers. Material of a generally more impressionistic and less official nature, which provides differently important insights into the experience of shipping, is held at the North West Film Archive (Chorlton Street, Manchester), in the many film archives that relate to Liverpool and Salford Docks.

Geographical societies and popular geographical literatures inspired, sponsored and published accounts of imperial ventures (Livingstone 1992). Regional societies and their publications played an important part in this process. For example, the Manchester Geographical Society, founded in 1884, was originally aimed at businessmen and others who were directly interested in commercial opportunities overseas, though its appeal quickly broadened (Freeman 1984). The Society's association with arguably imperial geographical traditions was evident in the first volume of its journal, published in 1885, in the form of an article by the African explorer H M Stanley. Archives, records and publications of the Manchester Geographical Society, including copies of the Society's Journal from 1885 to 1962, may be found at the Manchester Record Office and at John Rylands University Library of Manchester (Oxford Road, Manchester) (Lloyd 1991).

Another aspect of imperialism in which the North West played an important part related to medicine. In many parts of the world, particularly the tropics, disease was the biggest obstacle to imperial expansion and stability, and

consequently important contributions to medical science were made, not only by humanitarians, but also by individuals and organisations whose primary interests were the efficiency and viability of imperial investments (Hewa 1995; Macleod and Lewis 1988). Liverpool was to host one of England's two most important centres for research into tropical diseases, The Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. Early researchers in the LSTM included Ronald Ross, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist whose work in Sierra Leone identified the causes and possible means of preventing malaria (Gale 1976; Miller 1998; Power 1996). Many important publications and papers relating to the LSTM and to researchers such as Ross may be consulted at the University of Liverpool, Special Collections and Archives.

Exploration and travel were important in the description and sometimes the promotion of imperialism. Regional organisations and individuals were actively involved in the promotion and publication of travel and travel narratives. The involvement of the Manchester Geographical Society in this respect has already been noted. On another level, the region figured in imperial travel as a point of departure, both materially in acts of travel and also textually in descriptions of travel. Liverpool features in the diaries and letters of emigrants, ordinary people who left England for new lives in the colonies or (most often) America. It also enters into the more literary accounts of travellers, such as Mary Kingsley and Graham Greene, who spent a night or two in Liverpool before boarding their respective ships (see Blunt 1994). For travellers such as Elizabeth Gaskell, the North West was home, not just a place along the way but a constant reference point, which framed their experiences and narratives. Sources on the region's material and imaginative role as a point of departure, and/or a home left behind, include published travel books – such as Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and Greene's *Journey Without Maps* (1936). Unpublished emigrant diaries and letters are scattered among the local history libraries and archives of both the North West and the places to which people migrated. Emigration records and passenger papers relating to Port of Liverpool are held at Merseyside Maritime Museum. Passenger records relating to the Cunard Steamship Company (1840-1976), for example, are contained in the Special Collections and Archives of the University of Liverpool.

All this archival material points to a form of regional imperialism and reserve of regional material that would reward detailed research. It is important, now, to be more specific about this research might proceed, and how

archival and library-based research might be complemented by fieldwork and other techniques. It is also important to be specific about how, in the face of a dauntingly rich regional archive, an academic, amateur, undergraduate or school student might proceed. In this spirit, the following section reviews some projects, conducted by students at Salford University, on aspects of the imperial North West.

### **Investigations: student projects**

The following paragraphs summarise student projects, each of which illustrates a different approach to historical and geographical research on regional imperialism.

Although the North West is rich in relevant archives and libraries, perhaps the best place to begin a study of regional imperialism is in the field. Christopher Pickles and Tom Rice investigated 'imperial signatures across the imperial landscape of Manchester,' in the first instance, by going out into the city and interpreting streetscapes. They began by looking for references to imperialism in the city's buildings, monuments, street and place names. These references were sometimes clear, but sometimes not; to decode the imperial inscriptions from another age, it helped to read architectural guides (Bradshaw 1985) and critical studies of imperial architecture (Crinson 1996). Some imperial place names were obvious, while others had to be searched out, particularly where they had changed over time; here, contemporary and historic street maps and street directories proved useful, and enabled place names to be dated and related to histories of Manchester and of the British Empire.

The analysis of place (building and street) names revealed a semantic imprint, which hinted at specific territorial relationships and economic interests. For example, place names such as Bombay Street and Bombay Square suggest particular relationships with that Indian port. Naval Street, formerly Elizabeth Street, off Bengal Street in Ancoats, suggests further connections between imperial and naval power. The significance for Manchester of imperial trade, industry and wealth is suggested in names such as Ivory Street and Palm Street. The comparison of successive street maps and directories demonstrates that most of these imperial street names were designated in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. On the other hand, earlier street names refer to manufacturing involving imperial imports, for example Silk Street and City Cotton Mills. The names of buildings function similarly, as do their styles. India House, a cotton warehouse built on Whitworth Street in 1905-06 bore both semantic and stylistic references to empire; it expressed an imperial grandeur in its

proportions and details, which were never merely functional. And it was no coincidence that when Manchester City Council built a new town hall, as they did in the late 1860s, they did so in a style associated, more than any other, with Victorian imperialism: Gothic Revival (Crimson 1996). Pickles and Rice concluded by suggesting that, given the pervasive presence of imperialism in at least some aspects of Manchester's urban landscape, and in the light of Mayor of London Ken Livingstone's recent suggestion that some of that city's imperial monuments might have become obsolete or offensive, there might be a case for critically overhauling some aspects of Manchester's symbolic landscape.

Using some of the archives and libraries identified in the previous section, Sebastian Sillito, Mark Sutheran and Alison Williams investigated some of the legacies of the slave trade upon the people and landscapes of the North West. In particular, they drew upon the resources of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, alongside the University Libraries of Liverpool, Manchester and Salford, and Manchester Central Library. They looked widely for impacts of and perspectives on slavery in local and regional histories and geographies.

These sources revealed a variety of ways in which the region – not just the Port of Liverpool – was connected with slavery. Smaller regional ports played a part in the slave economies (Read and Stammers 1999), although they also declined as a result of slavery's concentration in the pre-eminent regional port (Schofield 1989). Toxteth and other districts of Liverpool and Manchester attracted concentrations of former slaves, who first settled in the district in the 1730s. Merchants and industrialists in the region became wealthy as a result of slavery, and expressed their affluence and their specifically imperial interests and experiences in public and private buildings such as Liverpool Town Hall, built between 1749 and 1754, the exterior of which includes carvings of black people, lions, tigers, elephants and crocodiles. Slavery was also expressed in street names such as Negro Row, Liverpool, where slaves were occasionally auctioned. The legacy of slavery has also been identified, more recently, as a backdrop to ongoing racial inequality, which has seen the Liverpool black population remain near the bottom of national educational and socio-economic hierarchies (Swann 1985), and, for better or worse, remain rooted to the residential areas they have occupied since the time of slavery (Martin 1999). The significance of imperial history for the present condition of Liverpool's black community is illustrated in the successful campaign for a museum to acknowledge and

explore their history and their place in the city; the Transatlantic Slavery Exhibition (in the Merseyside Maritime Museum) opened in 1994. Sillito, Sutheran and Williams concluded that, although Liverpool's slave trade ended nearly two hundred years ago, its legacies in the human geographies of the region are profound.

Drawing upon a mixture of secondary sources, Lisa Ogden and Grace Smith examined imperial cultural economies of coffee in the North West, considering both economic geographies of trade and processing, and also cultural geographies of consumption. Their sources addressed coffee consumption (Olsan 1991; Robinson 1977) and production (Swainson 1980) in British imperial contexts and in relation to international economies (Smith 1996). They also drew upon older published sources on the coffee industry, on coffee houses and consumers in England and the North West (Arkle 1912; Joff 1916; Smith 1957). Street directories also proved useful in tracing and locating coffee houses (e.g. Shaw 1987; 1932).

The North West played a pivotal role in importing, processing and distributing coffee. Trade statistics show that large quantities of the commodity were received and warehoused in Liverpool, and stored until required by markets in London and as far away as New York (Smith 1957). People in the region also consumed coffee; eighteenth and nineteenth-century street directories list numerous coffee houses. In 1774, for instance, there were six houses including Captains Coffee House in Moore Street, owned by S Forrar, and Exchange Coffee House in Water Street, owned by Mary Fleetwood (Shaw 1932). Like their London counterparts, these coffee houses were frequented by merchants and other businessmen who met there to collect mail, read newspapers, exchange information and conduct business (Joff 1916; Olsan 1991). The male domination of coffee houses was symptomatic and productive of the masculinist imperialism in which they played a part. Women were marginalised, and though some (such as Mary Fleetwood) owned coffee houses, and others attended as prostitutes (Roden 1977), women were not admitted as coffee drinkers (Roden 1977). The alignment of coffee drinking and imperialism was not always clear, however, for coffee houses also functioned as spaces of literary and liberal debate, which included a measure of anti-imperial and imperial reformist criticism (Arkle 1912; Roden 1977). Ogden and Smith therefore concluded that, while it is possible to make broad generalisations about the close relationship between coffee production and consumption and imperialism, local studies of the particular ways and the particular places in which coffee was drunk, might not



Figure 1: Pan-African Congress, reported in The Manchester Evening News (15 October, 1945). (Picture research: Catherine Rogers and Philippe Whittock)

and a newspaper index (for *The Times*) at Manchester Central Library, they examined one Manchester evening and one morning paper and, for comparison, one London-based national morning paper: then, as now, the *Manchester Evening News* was the most widely read evening paper in the region; *The Manchester Guardian* had yet to complete its move to London, and remained the most important regionally produced newspaper; the London *Times* offered a contrast to each of these. Willis and Mackman decided to focus on coverage of the Pan-African Conference, held in Manchester in 1945 (Adi and Sherwood 1995), and on the portrayal of decolonisation in selected African colonies in the early 1960s.

The regional media took a particular interest in the Pan-African Conference. *The Manchester Guardian* quoted Dr Millard, President of the Manchester Pan-African Federation, saying that ‘Manchester was probably the most liberal city in England’ (October 17, 1945; Figure 1). *The Manchester Evening News* used its front-page coverage as the springboard for an attack on the Conservatives, arguing that ‘the imperialists of Britain, headed by the Tory party, are as short-minded and short-sighted as they are ignorant’ (October 15, 1945; ‘Coloured people demand independence - treat us as equals’). Decolonisation received more coverage in the morning papers, which were pitched at national audiences and included more extensive national and international news, than in the more locally oriented evening paper. Their coverage reflected political rather than regional differences. Thus, the liberal *Manchester Guardian* examined the negative effects of colonialism on subject peoples, for example in its coverage of Sierra Leone’s independence (April 21, 1961). True to its more conservative form, the London *Times* stressed the benefits of colonial

only elucidate but also complicate the nature of this form of gendered imperialism.

Regional media – newspapers, magazines and television – offer insights into regional perspectives on imperialism. Peter Willis and Ben Mackman explored the ways in which regional newspapers covered African independence. Using archived newspapers (on microfilm)

rule, in supplements published to mark successive decolonisations, for example in Zambia (A N L Wina; 'Striking recovery', October 24, 1964). Willis and Mackman concluded: 'In contrast to the glorious transition from the end of Empire to the new Commonwealth that *The Times* portrays, *The Manchester Guardian* suggests the damage Britain has caused during its colonial history' and generally 'portrays a dysfunctional, decaying Empire.' (REF??)

## Conclusions

This paper began with a series of academic reflections on the geographical scales of imperialism. It suggested that, particularly in the light of recent reformulations of the region, regional analyses of imperial geographies might offer new insights into a set of processes that have more commonly been examined on other scales, particularly that of the nation and/or state. These insights might interrogate the following general questions. First, how has imperialism helped to constitute the region as a scale and space in its own right? Second, how has this particular region helped to constitute imperialism? Third, how does this region continue to constitute imperialism?

The paper moved from abstract to applied questions, and concentrated on how regional geographies of imperialism might be investigated, specifically with reference to the North West. It identified a number of distinct strands of imperialism, and suggested how these might be researched. Doing so, it broke into manageable proportions the difficult and multidimensional questions of how regional political and cultural economies operate. At the same time, it deferred the difficult question of how those variously imperial (and anti-imperial) strands might combine and interact, in an assemblage – often contradictory – of regional politics, culture, economy and society. The value of selected case studies, such as those presented in the preceding section, is that they begin the process of recombining these strands. The study of coffee, for example, addressed multiple themes of trade, production, consumption, gender, sexuality and class, which combine

in particular places and at various geographical scales to constitute geographies of imperialism. The process of recombining threads of regional imperialism can be advanced, further, by setting projects and case studies alongside each other, and regarding them as a collective and shared endeavour.

The research proposed, and the preliminary findings reviewed in this paper, have practical and political implications. They demonstrate the depth and breadth of the region's imperial embroilments; it follows that responsibility for imperialism cannot conveniently be displaced upon other social or political classes or regions. On the contrary, people in the North West played many important parts in making if sometimes also criticising and opposing, imperialism. As the theatre project at Burnage High School in 1986 demonstrated, an active knowledge of the region's complex historical and geographical embroilments with imperialism may help people in the North West to confront the racial and other issues faced in living here today. These issues may be confronted by individuals and groups of people, but also by governments. Although there is no regional government in the North West (as there is some parts of the United Kingdom) there are various tiers of sub-national government within the region, which might consider their role in this respect. Responsibility for imperialism has often been shouldered at the national level. Heads of state and national leaders have acknowledged some of the crimes of imperialism, for example President Clinton in his apology for slavery, and Queen Elizabeth in her respectful bow to the Amritsar monument (in her 1997 tour of India). Regional government leaders might make some similar gestures, for example in removing or reframing imperial statues, perhaps in erecting monuments to and otherwise recognising colonised peoples, and in considering the need for apologies and reparations. There may be scope for a range of local, urban and regional responses, not to dig up the past for its own sake, but to do so in the interests of the future, and with reference to ongoing regional problems.

## Footnote

This paper is illustrative rather than systematic or exhaustive. The author does, however, invite readers to send details of other relevant sources and studies, which may be included within, or linked to, a forthcoming website, entitled 'The Imperial North West.'

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