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Review of "Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution" by Priya Satia

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Book Reviews



Priya Satia. *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution*. New York: Penguin Press, 2018. Pp. 544.

In *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution*, Priya Satia provides a different way of looking at the industrial revolution and colonial expansion. With vivid prose and an impressive range of source material, she explains the importance of the small arms industry to British industrial development and explores the degree to which the multi-faceted nature of industrial capitalism makes us all complicit in the growth of the armaments industry. Professor Satia uses an ethical dispute from the 1790s among Quakers to illuminate the wider debate over the manufacture and sale of guns. It is an insightful and effective approach for a book with historical significance and contemporary relevance.

The book builds on recent work on military contracting, which is aptly described as “foundational to the first industrial economy” (p. 176).¹ With military procurement representing eighty per cent of government expenditure between 1688 and 1815, the powerful mutually reinforcing relationship between warfare and industry, with war industries often in the vanguard of development, is a central theme. The book describes the arms trade in the context of those key concepts of historiography of the eighteenth century—the “Fiscal-

¹ See, for example, Huw V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Gordon Bannerman, *Merchants and the Military in Eighteenth-Century Britain: British Army Contracts and Domestic Supply, 1739-1763* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008); Roger Knight and Martin Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet, 1793-1815: War, the British Navy, and the Contractor State* (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 2010); and Gareth Cole, *Arming the Royal Navy, 1793-1815: The Ordnance Office and the State* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012).

Military State” and “Contractor State.” In explaining the institutional and personal interactions which forged the economy, Satia makes a credible contribution to understanding British industrial development.

Many historians have explained the causes of Britain’s emergence as the “first industrial nation” but Satia provides an alternative to the Whiggish, progressive march of liberal political economy and peaceful industrial and entrepreneurial evolution. Violence and warfare are central to her narrative of industrial development and colonial expansion—a view which would have had some resonance with nineteenth-century radicals like Richard Cobden, but which challenges contemporary historical orthodoxy. While asserting that “war was fundamental to modern industrial life,” she does not argue that the gun industry drove the industrial revolution forward, nor does she consider expansion of the coal and cotton industries unimportant (p. xiii). Instead, the arms industry features as a portal for understanding how government spending, private enterprise, and colonial expansion acted as transformative economic influences.

The book consists of three parts which examine the industrial, social, and moral life of guns. The text incorporates gun production, industrial organisation, and the social, cultural, and ethical aspects of gun ownership and usage. Thematic variation means that the content is not strictly chronological and has a degree of repetition in places. While the scope of the book is broad in time and space, Birmingham is the geographical centre of gravity. As home of the metal trades and crucible of the industrial revolution, Birmingham’s industrial pedigree long pre-dated Manchester’s textile industry. Equally, innovations including division of labour were well-established in arms manufacturing and its impact on efficiency, quality, and productivity understood long before textile factory production.

The business risks of arms contracting, primarily fluctuating supply and demand, overstocking, and durability, were common to other forms of military contracting. While contracting was often characterised by small margins, and at times losses, it was also about large-scale operations. The credit mechanisms required led to diversity in business interests—a cross-fertilisation apparent throughout the eighteenth-century economy. Arms manufacturing was never based solely on private enterprise. British governments acknowledged it as a vital interest, and assumed a coordinating supply role, intervening in production, and providing support “haltingly, ungraciously, and yet vitally” (p. 161). In a somewhat breathless account, the granular

detail of the Birmingham trade, technical innovations adopted, and interlocking business connections are intricately described but are sometimes difficult to contextualise.

From Birmingham, we move to the social and cultural landscape of England where guns became identified, not least by gunmakers, with protection of property. Guns increasingly represented “the impersonal, bourgeois quality of private property” (p. 237). After 1689, a property-fixated law code and market-based economy gradually introduced new social relationships, values, and modes of behaviour. Parliament made a clear demarcation between property-owners and the property-less, reflected in fierce legislation such as the Black Acts of the 1720s. Convincing analysis and excellent prose characterise the description of incipient class conflict in rural England, with the perennially colourful topics of poaching, highwaymen, and smuggling a significant feature.

It is revelatory to learn that, throughout most of the eighteenth century, guns were used primarily as a deterrent—a threat of force and not real violence. Emotional detachment in using guns throughout the eighteenth century fed into notions of civility underpinning the political culture of the polite and commercial English people. The French Revolutionary wars changed that, with domestic militarism and exposure to military violence facilitating an increase in civilian gun use, neatly termed “the cultural work of war” (p. 254). Curiously, the further de-sensitisation to acts of violence occurred at a time when the destructive capability of firearms and the horrific injuries they caused (graphically described in popular culture) were only too real. One wonders whether the author may have addressed British ‘exceptionalism’ more fully relative to this development.

In colonial territories, guns were pervasive, acting as weapons of war, and as instruments of terror and discipline as well as commercial tools. Imperial expansion often led to guns shaping social interactions, while also featuring in “frontier diplomacy” in North America, Africa, and India (pp. 268-9). In West Africa, guns conferred and enhanced status—supporting gunmakers’ claims that they were not used merely for killing. Yet their ornamental and prestige value meant that they functioned as a commodity and a medium of exchange in perpetuating the slave trade. Despite the danger of potentially arming rebels, and in contrast with tighter domestic regulation amid social and economic upheaval, guns flooded into the colonies. In this core-periphery relationship, guns were symbolic of the imperial

authority and industrial power of Britain's "civilizing mission" but they clearly had legitimate, practical uses in frontier environments, such as hunting or pest control.

The extent to which the British economy and society were integrated with warfare was a difficulty for those, like Quakers, theologically opposed to war. Quaker business enterprises in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to many successful family businesses, including the Hanburys, Barclays, Lloyds, and Gurneys. With business activities informed by ethical considerations, direct participation in war materiel production was problematic. After 1792, with guns increasingly viewed as primarily instruments of war, the Society of Friends raised objections to the gun-making Galton family, who were accused of violating Quaker testimony against war for financial gain.

Samuel Galton Junior defended himself by arguing that every economic actor contributed to Britain's war-making capacity, and that Quakers investing in government loans and securities were equally culpable. Galton claimed he had no control over the use of his products, and that manufacturing firearms was a result, not a cause, of war. While Quakers cited degrees of complicity in sanctioning warfare, Galton held that if principle was at issue, degree did not matter. Galton's defence of societal complicity, either as employers, employees, investors, or taxpayers, was subsequently revived by arms companies. While recognising "degrees of complicity," Satia herself cites Galton's defence as possessing "analytical merit" in implicating, historically and contemporaneously, the wider society, and not exonerating individuals (p. 341). Modern history suggests that we think otherwise. Oligopoly among arms manufacturers, secret diplomacy, and conspiratorial relations with government, military and intelligence services has narrowed public perceptions of the field of complicity.

With advancing mass production technology, standardisation, and interchangeable parts, weapons technology led to great industrial spin-offs and applications—further evidence of the importance of armaments to industrial progress. Indeed, a valid historical parallel is drawn by Satia between the formative influence of the arms industry being smothered by the narrative of unbounded entrepreneurship common to the industrial revolution and the modern development of Silicon Valley. In the contemporary debate on firearms in the United States, the National Rifle Association's recycled argument on the

neutral status of guns, also made by eighteenth-century gunmakers, is pointedly raised. While relevant, brevity of discussion makes this content appear slightly “tagged on” to the main text.

While the book will primarily interest social, economic, and military historians, it may well, and deserves to, attract a wider reading public. It is always difficult to quantify ‘influence’ in history but the core thesis convincingly portrays arms manufacturing as a vital part of British imperial and industrial development—assuming a function under-estimated, until now, in the existing historiography. Equally, government’s ability to act effectively in an economic capacity, through regulation, organisation, and incentives, adds to, and confirms the importance of, the eighteenth-century “Fiscal-Military State” and “Contractor State.” The author’s stance on gun control is not prejudicial to historical interpretation and judgment, for her nuanced scholarship and compelling arguments are a result of fine analysis and evaluation. In this original and interesting account, Priya Satia has added another dimension to our understanding of industrial development. By encouraging us to think deeper and wider, she has done exactly what historians should be doing.

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