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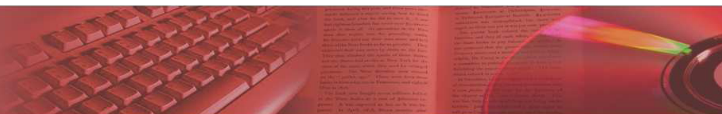

Steve Attridge. *Nationalism, Imperialism, and Identity in Late Victorian Culture: Civil and Military Worlds.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. ix + 229 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-80251-9.

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Hooligans or Heroes? Imagining the Subjects of Empire During the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902

Steve Attridge manages a significant achievement in this work which offers fresh perspectives on a period that has been the focus of renewed (and close) critical attention since the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War in 2002. His object is two-fold: to explore the relation of the concept of national character to issues of patriotism and nationalism and to examine the ways in which the popular image of the soldier destabilizes or reinforces nationalist ideals as "the borders of empire and civilian life are negotiated, affirmed or denied" (p. 13). It is an ambitious task given the plethora of material that engulfed public discourse and the popular British imagination at the time and which was to be found in, among other phenomena, the New Journalism, fed by graphic images and reports from the front-line; the novelty of moving pictures which, with photo-journalism, added a new dimension of graphic realism to the information feedback loop; as well as the mass-produced and widely circulated pieces that covered writings as varied as pamphlets, histories, periodical articles, poetry and novels. However, in a series of essays–like chapters that are linked by their focus rather than by a univocal methodology–Attridge offers the reader a scholarly assessment of a shifting phenomenon, that is, the contingent process that informs identity formation as public discourses and the new media called into question some of the existing verities of late Victorian culture.

Beginning the analysis of patriotism and nationalism with a detailed exposition of music hall culture at the turn of the century and the ways in which audiences reacted to the popular songs and theatrical representations of the era, Attridge complicates the discussion by demonstrating the sometimes ambivalent, often ironic, attitudes to the war and the role of the soldier that informed contemporary opinion. Patriotic fervor of the kind exhibited at the relief of Mafeking is never a simple feature of the music hall review so that any reading of the civil view of "Tommy Atkins" and the war effort must be qualified by the awareness that ridicule operates as effectively as endorsement in the performances that characterized music hall culture during this period. Drawing on earlier insights, Attridge demonstrates the importance of the notion of differentiated audiences (marked by class and geographic location: from the affluent, middle-class West End to the squalid suburbs of East London) in the construction of the common soldier.[1] He argues persuasively that analysts cannot use the songs, films, plays, and sketches that characterize music hall culture to establish a general endorsement of the war–rather any clear sense of nationhood is problematic through this medium, and the soldier figure becomes complicated in a tussle that finds him sometimes supported, at other times derided, in the class divisions that inform the representations of the soldier, the war, and their reception by differentiated audiences. A strength of this chapter, and of the approach undertaken by Attridge, in general, is his close scrutiny of texts. It is an approach that presents the reader with both accessible and hitherto inaccessible material derived from a great many sources and, while he offers an interpretation, there is space in the dialogue between author, text and reader for the insertion of additional insights. The flow of analytic insight in each section, from cultural specificities to more generalized theoretical observations, is carefully controlled and supported by an astute awareness of the degree to which narrow ideological readings (such as exist in a left/right dichotomy) fail to account for the competing views of the soldier, whether as hero or anti-hero, that emerge in the cultural representations of the period. Attridge underlines a point made by Paula M. Krebs that, far from being "The Last of the Gentleman Wars," the Boer War heralds modernity and a way of conducting and representing war that was to reach a nadir in the trenches of the first World War and to generate a template for war and the construction of the soldier (again as hero or anti-hero) that prevailed through most of the conflicts of the twentieth century.[2]

Much of the analysis of the relationship between the civil and military worlds Attridge is holding up to scrutiny is dedicated to a subtle assessment of the impact of Rudyard Kipling's work upon the popular imagination. By the 1890s, Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads* had established him as the literary spokesman of empire, but, as Attridge demonstrates, his support for the war in South Africa modulates into a more revisionist perspective as the War progresses and any simplistic affirmation of the British soldier as an instrument of a validated imperial project is qualified. When Buchanan attacks Kipling's role in the reifying of the excesses of militarism, characterizing him in 1899 as antagonistic towards civilian ethics, Attridge suggests that this is only partially true: Kipling, as read and understood through critics such as Buchanan, depicts in the image of the soldier of the *Barrack Room Ballads* not the hero of empire, but rather a hooligan, and points the way (terrifyingly) to "absolute barbarism."[3] This view is one that Attridge, by his selection of exemplars for his position, goes some way to refuting, suggesting that Buchanan attempts to establish support on Kipling's part for all that is vulgar and dangerous in public life ("Tommy Atkins" as violent hooligan), whereas, in fact, Kipling's belief in the imperial project is better understood (through his Boer War poems, specifically) as suffused with ambivalence and doubt rather than ideological certainty. There is a manifest shift in the poet's perspective on the soldier he had constructed in India and the soldier who emerges on the South African veld, which Attridge demonstrates in his informative chapters on Kipling. Sensitive readings of the work of other important literary figures of the time (by the pro-imperial poet, Henly and the literary giant, Hardy who was a serious critic of the war) contextualize literary representation and its impact on an increasingly contested idea of national identity. The achievement of the central chapters of this work, it seems, lies in Attridge's impressive textual analyses which bring together not so much original material (though they do this as well) as an original negotiation of material that is familiar but which has not been given the considered attention afforded it here.

The discussion in chapter 6 of identity and nationalism that the novels of the Indian Mutiny (published at the time of the Boer War) generate is intriguing. Here Attridge charts a nostalgia among these writers for a simpler adversary, a less complicated enemy against whom the heroics of the British soldier can be more positively measured. The displacement in these narratives, from the temporal moment of the Boer War backwards to the 1850s, confirms for Attridge the destabilizing of established perceptions of national identity–yearning for a (fictional) less fraught past (a less contingent reading of the national character exemplified in the fictional hero) indicates a degree of insecurity, precisely the insight about the contingent nature of identity that this work is at pains to expose.

If I have any reservations about a work that I found compelling and informative, they lie in the absence of a sustained analysis of the impact of the (then) new media–cinema, for example, and the new journalism, especially the impact of photo-journalism on the construction of a national identity. Images from the front that depicted the horrors of war, say, at Spioenkop, apparently unmediated (though of course they were not), as well as the speed in communications of this early age of information need to be read and analyzed alongside the admittedly powerful impact of the written forms of culture. The degree to which Milner, Roberts, and Kitchener controlled and manipulated the information that was relayed back to England (and the degree to which humanitarians such as Emily Hobhouse inflected public discourse and correspondingly public perceptions) is only peripherally engaged, but it is interesting to consider what part these powerful new media played in the interrogation of the idea of the soldier and his role in cultural formations as the British Empire faced down (but in some aspects was unable to annihilate) its demons at the turn of the twentieth century. This is only to suggest a possible augmentation of the argument rather than to deny in any way a project that combines the virtues of close critical scrutiny with a theoretically informed orientation towards the multiplicity of resources that the Boer War generated.

Steve Attridge has successfully combined historiography and literary criticism in order to illuminate a dark corner of the British imperial project. The range of material he has marshaled here, together with his assiduous attention to detailed exposition and comparative analysis, mark this work as an important contribution to the discussion of "nationalism, imperialism and identity" in the period when the reign of Queen Victoria draws to a close. He treads a careful methodological path between the pitfalls of what Keith Windshuttle regards as the potential essentialism of Said's approach as evinced in *Orientalism* (1978), a work which Attridge acknowledges as providing the ballast for his own theorizing. He clearly indicates the value of a discursive approach that places texts against each other in order to demonstrate the ways in which they "may be differentiated, may be combined to be individuated" (p. 190). A strength of the approach he adopts is neutrality and impartiality, evident in his

analysis of the competing ideological claims discernible in the vast mass of material he covers. Yet, his conclusions are firm. A univocal reading of civil and military relations during the Boer War is neither desirable nor tenable and to deny the complexities of social relations at this time is to deny the representations that Attridge has assembled and carefully scrutinized and their emblematic power, prefiguring as they do the contested terrain of identity formation that obtains even in this, the first decade of the twenty-first century. He states clearly that his research has demonstrated lacunae in the study of this period. For example, a detailed investigation of the role of women in the Boer War has yet to be undertaken, though Paula M. Krebs has addressed some of the issues in her work and there is the role of black Africans in the Boer War which is still only partially documented.[4] This is an acknowledgement that there is work still to be done on the texts to be selected, comparatively evaluated, and differentiated in the historiographic or literary enterprise, but Steve Attridge has made an important contribution through this work, which delicately dissects the workings of ideology in a range of culturally significant representations that shaped and determined a nation's shifting image of itself as the twentieth century was set in motion.

Notes

[1]. He acknowledges the work of L. Senelick, "Politics as Entertainment: Victorian Music Hall Songs," *Victorian Studies* 19 (1975): pp. 84-98; D. Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall, Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and P. Bailey, ed., *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) in particular.

[2]. "'The Last of the Gentleman Wars': Women in the Boer War Concentration Camp Controversy," *History Workshop Journal* 33 (1992): pp. 3-56.

[3]. Quoted in Attridge, Robert Buchanan, "The Voice of the Hooligan" *Contemporary Review* 86 (1899): pp. 70, 83.

[4]. P. M. Krebs, *Gender, Race and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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