THE IMPERIAL EXPERIENCE

CONTEXT AND COMMENTARY

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THE IMPERIAL EXPERIENCE

From Carlyle to Forster

C. C. Eldridge

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THERE IS A BRITISH EMPIRE
FOREIGNERS
PLEASE TAKE NOTICE AND KEEP
OFF IT

C. R. L. Fletcher and R. Kipling,
A History of England (1911)

To Ruth

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Editor's Preface

J. H. Plumb has said that 'the aim of (the historian) is to understand men both as individuals and in their social relationships in time. "Social" embraces all of man's activities – economic, religious, political, artistic, legal, military, scientific – everything, indeed, that affects the life of mankind.' Literature is itself similarly comprehensive. From Terence onwards writers have embraced his dictum that all things human are their concern.

It is the aim of this series to trace the interweavings of history and literature, to show by judicious quotation and commentary how those actually working within the various fields of human activity influenced and were influenced by those who were writing the novels, poems and plays within the several periods. An attempt has been made to show the special contribution that such writers make to the understanding of their times by virtue of their peculiar imaginative 'feel' for their subjects and the intensely personal angle from which they observe the historical phenomena that provide their inspiration and come within their creative vision. In its turn the historical evidence, besides and beyond its intrinsic importance, serves to 'place' the imaginative testimony of the writers.

The authors of the several volumes in this series have sought to intermingle history and literature in the conviction that the study of each is enhanced thereby. They have been free to adopt their own approach within the broad general pattern of the series. The topics themselves have sometimes also a particular slant and emphasis. Commentary, for instance, has had to be more detailed in some cases than in others. All the contributors to the series are at one, however, in the belief (at a time when some critics would not only divorce texts from their periods but even from their authors) that literature is the creation of actual men and women,

xii *Editor's Preface*

actually living in an identifiable set of historical circumstances, themselves both the creatures and the creators of their times.

ARTHUR POLLARD

Author's Preface

This volume is intended as an introductory text for those studying the literature and history of the British empire during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, it builds on the work and pioneering efforts of a multitude of historians and literary specialists too numerous to acknowledge. The book is also the product of an attempt to provide a genuinely interdisciplinary course on 'Images of Empire', extending well beyond the realm of literature, for a Victorian Studies degree scheme. Much is therefore owed to the tolerance and cooperation of colleagues across the disciplines, as well as the stimulus of teaching several generations of enquiring and critical students. Their contribution has been invaluable.

When the course began in the late 1970s, there was no suitable textbook covering so broad a field. This was soon remedied with the appearance of John MacKenzie's *Propaganda and Empire* (1984) and the launching of the 'Studies in Imperialism' series by Manchester University Press whose contributors have so advanced our understanding of cultural imperialism. This book has benefited greatly from their efforts and example, though its faults and omissions remain entirely my own.

In other respects, the book is both a product of the renewed interest amongst literary specialists in what used to be called the 'literature of imperialism' and a reaction to some recent developments in the literary study of that subject. I refer not simply to the understandable tendency to concentrate on élite texts, as though the works of Forster and Orwell relating to empire can be regarded as representative of the writing and thinking of the inter-war period, nor to the heavy concentration on political correctness and the invention of jargon, but to the tendency in much recent colonial discourse analysis to divorce literary texts from the conditions and circumstances in which they were produced.

As a result, imperialism has frequently been turned into a static, vague and generalised concept, shorn of its complexities and ambiguities, isolated from historical events, the subtleties of economic and political relationships, and the changing intellectual climate of the day. The founders of Orientalist Studies have suffered in a similar way: scholars who admired and sympathised with all things Indian, and whose sole wish was to preserve them, are now accused of having developed a destructive weapon aimed at perpetuating Western intellectual dominance and imperial rule. Such misreadings of the historical record not only confuse intention and effect, but force late twentieth-century perceptions and susceptibilities onto nineteenth-century words and actions. As a consequence, hostile moral verdicts have been cast on whole previous generations. Historians, viewing such interpretations as ahistorical, have generally avoided participation in such disputes.

This volume, then, in its attempt to place the imaginative literature of the British imperial experience firmly within a broad chronological framework, will no doubt be viewed by some as old fashioned in its attempt to establish a relationship between ideas, intellectual movements and events. It is nevertheless hoped that it will be of use, especially to the student, in placing the literature of the day in its proper social, economic and political context and shifting intellectual climate, emphasising as it does the intermingling of pro-empire and anti-empire themes, changing perceptions of the role and function of empire, and the divergences, and striking convergences, of élite and popular culture.

My many debts to historians and literary commentators will be obvious from the text. In writing the book, I would particularly like to single out Kathy Miles and Robert Ford, of the inter-library loan service of the University of Wales, Lampeter, for their efficient service, unfailing courtesy and willingness to help with bibliographical checks. Like all contributors to this series, I have also benefited greatly from the wise counsel and continued encouragement of the General Editor, Arthur Pollard, who has coaxed a text from this somewhat hesitant contributor to a literary series. My

thanks also go to a succession of editors at the publishers for their patience and understanding when events diverted me into more mundane affairs.

C. C. ELDRIDGE