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British country houses and empire, 1700–1930

The image in Figure 1 comes from Osterley Park in West London. Originally part of the bell-pull system that was used to summon servants to various rooms, it is of unknown date, though the script style suggests a pre-1850 vintage.¹ Now tucked away in a display case in a basement corridor, it goes unnoticed by the vast majority of visitors to the house. But this small and seemingly innocuous label carries three layers of meaning that illustrate the relationship between country houses and the British Empire. First, it was a part of the house's fabric, a reflection of the hierarchy of masters and servants that was essential to Osterley's ability to function as a great house. Second, it reflected the presence of fashions and styles adopted from the Empire. The 'Indian Room' was probably named because it was at one time decorated with brightly coloured chintz fabrics that had been imported from India by the East India Company. These fabrics were highly prized, and numerous eighteenth-century country houses featured 'chintz rooms' in which they were proudly displayed as window dressings and bedcovers. Third, the room invoked the financial relationship between Osterley Park and India. In 1713, the house was acquired by Sir Francis Child, a London goldsmith and banker who was a major investor in the East India Company. He and his two sons Robert and Francis all served as Company directors, confirming that the family continued to own substantial East India shares into the next generation. Their income from the generous dividends paid out by the Company thus likely contributed both to Sir Francis's original purchase of Osterley Park and to his grandson Sir Francis's rebuilding of the house to the designs of Robert Adam in the 1760s. It also contributed to the house's interior décor. According to the National Trust, which now owns the house, Osterley is 'rich in Asian objects', many of which were acquired by the Childs in the eighteenth century through their East India Company connections.²



Figure 1 The label from the servants' bell-pull system for the 'Indian Room' at Osterley Park in Middlesex

The 'Indian Room' label from Osterley's bell-pull system thus illustrates the economic and cultural aspects of the relationship between country houses and the British Empire. This book is a study of that relationship, of the ways in which country houses like Osterley served as venues for the expression of personal and national imperial engagement between 1700 and 1930. This might have been due, as at Osterley, to the participation of the owner or a family member in imperial commerce, administration or defence, or it might have been a more general reflection of the presence of the British Empire in contemporary culture. Whatever the particulars, country houses functioned as vessels for the cultural expression of empire in metropolitan context, along with literature, art and music, all of which have been thoroughly examined by scholars for imperial content. In spite of their immediate connection to the people who wielded power in both the metropolitan and colonial arenas, however, the relationship between country houses and empire has been largely ignored.³

It might be argued that the social exclusiveness of country houses, which were built and owned by a narrow group of wealthy elite males, limits their ability to serve as a means by which to examine broader cultural developments. In many ways, however, country houses transcended this narrow perspective as both absorbers and conveyers of

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imperial elements. They visited by a wide range of people, including, in increasing numbers as time went on, tourists of all classes. By the eighteenth century, Peter Mandler observes:

The urge to show off the booty of erudition and travel posed an interesting problem for the culturally ambitious country-house owner . . . His collections had to be seen and admired for his skill and taste as a connoisseur to be fully appreciated; he had therefore to ensure that his impregnable fortifications were just sufficiently permeable to admit any visitors able to assess, appreciate and, preferably, report on his achievements.⁴

In the nineteenth century, railways made day-tripping efficient and affordable, as even the distant corners of Britain became accessible. By the 1920s, over 230 castles, abbeys, gardens and country houses were open to the public.⁵ It is important to remember that country-house tourists did not simply accept without question the aesthetic standards and dictates of fashion that they were presented with on their tours.⁶ Their assessment at times must have included considerations and interpretations of the imperial elements of country houses, elements which were viewed differently by visitors than they were by the owners. In this way, the imperial aspects of country houses came to have not just one but a multitude of meanings in contemporary British culture.

Conventional representations of the country house in literature and other cultural arenas, however, tend to depict them in one-dimensional fashion, as Arcadian retreats that were blissfully isolated from political intrigue and the grubby world of trade.⁷ In reality, however, country houses have long absorbed and reflected Britain's engagement with the external world. From the sixteenth century onwards, continental styles, particularly those inspired by Italy, had a major impact, first on Elizabethan 'prodigy houses' such as Burghley and Longleat, and later on their baroque and Palladian successors. In the eighteenth century, elite young men on the Grand Tour went to the Continent in order to acquire cultural sophistication, the rarest antiquities and the finest works of art. As the century wore on, however, the upper classes began to look beyond Europe, and towards the Empire, in their quest for the most desirable and beautiful things with which to fill their houses. To be sure, it was less common for these non-European objects to be acquired directly through travel by the house's owner. Even so, they should be assessed as part of the sophisticated and cosmopolitan identities that were constructed by the British upper classes in order to prove their worthiness of membership in the elite.⁸

This book covers the period between 1700 and 1930 because it encompasses both the peak of imperial influence on British culture

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and the peak of country-house acquisition and construction. In the eighteenth century, the Empire first became a prominent part of the metropolitan British political and cultural landscape, and of Britain's definition of itself as a nation. It remained so until after the First World War, when its role began to diminish, as colonial nationalisms and declining British power set the stage for decolonisation. The period from 1700 to 1930 also coincides with the most significant era in the history of the British country house. The eighteenth century saw a remarkable surge in their number: between 1700 and 1760, 273 new country houses were built in England, compared to only 84 in the previous half-century.⁹ There was another boom at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Although the pace slowed after 1800, there were still a significant number built, as injections of wealth from industry, trade and finance, as well as empire, brought new men into the landed elite. After a last burst of extravagance in the Edwardian era, the pressures engendered by declining agricultural profits brought the great age of country-house building to an end. By end of the Second World War, country houses were being demolished at a rate of one every five days.¹¹

The end of country houses as the centres of wealth, status and power, however, freed them to assume a new role in British culture, as they came to embody national values and virtues such as tradition and stability. This development had a tremendous impact on their future; for the first time, they were viewed as the cultural possessions of the nation as a whole, rather than of a narrow elite.¹² In 1950, Christopher Hussey wrote in *Country Life*:

The majority of English country houses are not really comparable with continental counterparts. The ideals and ways of life that they express, though superficially similar, differed so radically from those of France or Italy, for example, that they have to be accepted as *sui generis*. In England, it is remarkable . . . in how many instances their undertakings were adaptations, more or less ingenious, of older buildings, and frequently were left uncompleted. It is surprising that this piecemeal approach to building – which was later condoned as something of a virtue by the national relish for the picturesque and romantic – should have produced so many stately results as it did. It happened so regularly, however, as to be recognizable in retrospect as a national characteristic – counterpart to the evolutionary course of our constitutional history.¹³

Hussey's view of country houses as representing Englishness has come to be a pervasive part of their present-day identity; Peter Mandler writes that 'the stately homes of England, it is now often claimed, are that country's greatest contribution to western civilization. They are the quintessence of Englishness: they epitomize the English love of domesticity, of the countryside, of hierarchy, continuity and tradition.'¹⁴

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This view has been eagerly promoted by institutions such as *Country Life* and the National Trust as they seek to elevate the cultural importance – and thereby secure the survival – of the houses that serve as their primary focus.

But a closer examination of the purported ‘Englishness’ of country houses raises questions about aligning them so neatly with national identity, and about what that national identity truly encompasses. To take one example, in 1922, Vita Sackville-West described Knole, the enormous house in Kent that had been in her family since 1580, as ‘no mere excrescence, no alien fabrication, no startling stranger seen between the beeches and oaks’. Instead, it was

above all an English house. It has the tone of England; it melts into the green of the garden turf, into the tawnier green of the park beyond, into the blue of the pale English sky; it settles down in its hollow amongst the cushioned tops of the trees; the brown-red of those roofs is the brown-red of the roofs of humble farms and pointed oast-houses, such as stain over a wide landscape of England the quilt-like pattern of the fields.¹⁵

Sackville-West’s friend (and at the time lover) Virginia Woolf, however, offered a different, more global view of the house. In *Orlando* (1928), she wrote of Knole, ‘When Orlando came to reckon up the matter of furnishing with rosewood chairs and cedar-wood cabinets, with silver basins, china bowls and Persian carpets, every one of the three hundred and sixty-five bedrooms which the house contained, he saw it would be no light one.’¹⁶ This was no fictional vision, for Knole has long contained items from far-flung locales, including Britain’s colonies. An inventory of 1799, for example, shows that the Great Hall contained ‘two pieces of Egyptian sculpture’, ‘a rhinoceros’s horn’, ‘an antelope’s horn’ and ‘two spears from the South Seas’.¹⁷

The imperial flavour of Knole’s contents can still be seen in the Crimson Drawing Room, used since the early nineteenth century to display Knole’s collection of paintings by Sir Joshua Reynolds (Figure 2.) On the floor is a carpet – perhaps one of those that Woolf refers to – made in Portugal’s Indian colony of Goa in the early seventeenth century. The scenes in the four corners of European sailors and ships represent the assassination of Bahadur Shah, Sultan of Gujarat, by the Portuguese, who killed him in retaliation for the blind eye he turned upon the Gujarati traders who evaded customs. On the wall beside the door hangs Reynolds’s portrait of Wang-y-Tong, a Chinese servant. In the early 1770s, Wang-y-Tong was brought to England from Canton by a Sackville family friend, John Bradby Blake, an official of the East India Company.¹⁸

The carpet and portrait have been in their current locations for some time. An inventory of 1765 lists ‘a small Persia carpet’ as being



Figure 2 Crimson Drawing Room at Knole in Kent, looking much as it has since the late eighteenth century. Sir Joshua Reynolds's painting of the Chinese servant Wang-y-Tong is visible at the top left, and the Indian carpet depicting the assassination of Bahadur Shah is on the floor

in the 'the Drawing Room upstairs', and the inventory of 1799 also mentions a 'Persian carpet' among the contents of the room.¹⁹ The portrait was at Knole by 1780, and it has been in the Crimson Drawing Room since at least 1799, for the inventory lists among its contents a portrait of 'Mr Warnoton (a Chinese Youth)'.²⁰ Knole may therefore be a quintessentially English house, but its contents display long-standing links to imperial locales. Does this make Vita Sackville-West wrong? Not necessarily. In describing Knole in the late eighteenth century, she envisioned the 3rd Duke of Dorset walking in the garden with his mistress, the Venetian ballerina Giovanna Baccelli, 'attended by the Chinese boy carrying her gloves, her fan or her parasol':

Those were the days when the Clock Tower, oddly recalling a pagoda, was but newly erected; when the great rose-and-gold Chinese screen in the Poets' Parlour was new and brilliant in the sun; when the Coromandel chests were new toys; and the Italian pictures and statuary brought back by the Duke from Rome were still pointed out as the latest acquisitions . . .

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Amusement was caused too, no doubt, among the guests of the Duke and the dancer by Sir Joshua's portrait of the Chinese boy squatting on his heels, a fan in his hand, and the square toes of his red shoes protruding from beneath his robes.²¹

For Sackville-West, these exotic items – the Chinese screen, the chests from the Coromandel Coast of southern India, Reynolds's portrait of the Chinese servant – were easily and thoroughly incorporated into Knole's fabric. She did not view them as anomalous intrusions, but as components of its long, organic, innately and uniquely English evolution.

Knole thus raises questions about the ways in which country houses have been made to represent a traditional, insular version of Englishness. Also ignored in the conventional view is that thousands of houses were and are located in other parts of the British Isles besides England, in nations that have their own, distinctive and unique relationships with both the United Kingdom and the British Empire. Their owners evinced complex and often conflicting loyalties, as their recognition of the political, social and economic advantages of the Union did not always preclude them from maintaining a strong attachment to their native countries, which was reflected in the proud display in their houses of expressions of cultural and political nationalism that were directed against English political sovereignty. Nonetheless, the Scottish, Welsh and Irish landed elite were often active and enthusiastic participants in – and beneficiaries of – British imperial expansion overseas, and that, too, was often reflected in their houses.

Scottish country houses in particular simultaneously reflected the nation's history as an independent entity and as a part of the British Empire. In the dining room of Dunvegan Castle, the MacLeod family's seat on the Isle of Skye, a portrait by Allan Ramsay from around 1747 shows Norman MacLeod, 22nd chief of the clan, clad from head to toe in red tartan in defiance of the proscription of traditional Highland garb after the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Hanging nearby are Sir Henry Raeburn's portraits of the 23rd chief, Major General Norman MacLeod, who served in the American Revolution and in India, and his second wife, Sarah, who was the daughter of Nathaniel Stackhouse, a member of the governing council of Bombay. In the drawing room hangs another portrait of General MacLeod, this one painted in India in the 1780s by Johann Zoffany. It shows him in full-dress uniform, with Indian battle scenes, including soldiers mounted on elephants, in the background. On the adjacent wall is Zoffany's portrait of Sarah, standing before a Mughal temple. This room serves as a fitting setting for the portraits, for 'the General', as he was known, returned from India in 1790 with a fortune sufficient to transform what had been a decrepit medieval castle into a comfortable residence. The changes were most

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visible in the drawing room, which was converted from the castle's great hall into an elegant neoclassical space. Dunvegan's family portraits thus provide a vivid reminder of the rapid transformation that Scotland underwent in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, from rebellion against the Union to active and eager participant in the British Empire.

In Ireland, country houses occupied an even more complex position at the nexus of nationalist, unionist and imperial forces. Coole Park, the Galway home of the Gregory family, was last owned by Lady Augusta Gregory, a major force behind the Celtic Revival. In the early twentieth century, she transformed Coole Park into a rural retreat for the leading lights of Irish literature, including George Bernard Shaw, J. M. Synge, Sean O'Casey and W. B. Yeats. If any country house had a solid claim to nationalist admiration, Coole did; as Yeats told Lady Gregory, 'there is no house in Ireland with so fine a record.'²² But even so, Lady Gregory recognised that her own death would likely bring about the death of the house as well: 'I have lived there and loved it these forty years and through the guests who have stayed there it counts for much in the awakening of the spiritual and intellectual side of our country. If there is trouble now, and it is dismantled and left to ruin, that will be the whole country's loss.'²³ Her fears proved prescient: her only child, a son, was killed in the First World War, and after she died in 1932, Coole's contents were auctioned and the house was left to rot by the Irish government. It was demolished nine years later. Like other Irish houses, Coole had come to be seen as the power base of an elite whose ethnic and cultural roots lay elsewhere. As Brian Friel puts it in his play *Aristocrats* (1980), 'When we talk about the Big House in this country, we usually mean the Protestant big house, with its Anglo-Irish tradition and culture; and the distinction is properly made between that tradition and culture and what we might call the native Irish tradition, which is Roman Catholic.'²⁴ Coole was not burned, as two hundred Irish country houses were in the early 1920s, but it was destroyed by the same forces in a less violent form.²⁵

There is another interpretation of Coole's history, however. The house was purchased in 1768 by Robert Gregory, a native of Galway who had amassed an enormous fortune in the service of the East India Company. A century later, Sir William Gregory, Lady Gregory's husband, served as Governor of Ceylon from 1872 to 1877. These links with the Empire left their mark upon Coole. In her memoir of the house, published in 1931, Lady Gregory wrote of how Sir William, 'with a heart for the East', filled the library with 'Singalese poems, and such works as *Harivansa* and *Raghervansa*, and *Gosha* and the *Ramayura*, from his beloved Ceylon'.²⁶ In his autobiographical

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Dramatis Personae (1935), Yeats, too, noted the presence of Coole's imperial heritage:

Mogul or Persian paintings had been brought from the Far East by a Gregory chairman of the East India Company, great earthenware ewers and basins, great silver bowls, by Lady Gregory's husband, a famous Governor of Ceylon who had married in old age . . . In the hall, or at one's right hand as one ascended the stairs, hung Persian helmets, Indian shields, Indian swords in elaborate sheaths, stuffed birds from various parts of the world.²⁷

Lady Gregory never acknowledged the complexities of Coole as a site that simultaneously represented Ireland's participation in the colonisation of other places and the desire of the Irish themselves for freedom from British control. In 1920, she wrote in her journal that

through 150 years or more, Coole has been a place of peace. We came through the Land League days . . . without police protection or any application to the country for compensation – for there were no outrages. Coole has not only been a place of peace during all that time, but a home of culture in more senses than one . . . Richard Gregory collected that fine library; William's father died from famine-fever brought on by his ministrations to the poor. He himself had a highly honoured name in Parliament and in Ceylon, loving Coole all the time, all through his life-time.²⁸

Lady Gregory failed to perceive that she would have viewed the achievements as a colonial administrator that had made her late husband an 'honoured name' in Ceylon very differently, had they taken place in Ireland. But her failure illustrates the inescapable, and ultimately fatal, dilemma of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, torn between their loyalty to the British Empire and their loyalty to Ireland. Coole Park thus helps to illuminate the complex imperial history of Ireland's houses, and the ways in which that imperial history intertwined with the nation's unique social, economic and political evolution over the last three centuries.

This book thus attempts to restore the Empire to its rightful place of centrality in the history of the country house in all parts of the British Isles. The tendency to see the imperial histories of British country houses as peripheral rather than central conforms to what Antoinette Burton refers to as a 'classically *imperial* concept of nation-empire relations' in which the British metropolis 'tends to remain the fixed referent, the *a priori* body upon which empire is inscribed'.²⁹ Burton and other scholars have called for this conception of the relationship between metropolis and empire to be revised. Maya Jasanoff describes how a visit to the Marble Palace in Calcutta compelled her to rethink traditional dichotomies between coloniser and colonised:

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Most of what I had read about empire and culture drew a detailed if rather insidious picture of white European colonizers trying to supplant, appropriate and denigrate the non-European peoples and societies they encountered. More attention was paid to how Europeans responded to non-Europeans than vice-versa, and emphasis tended to be placed more on conflict than on convergence. But here was something quite different: a site genuinely embedded in the cultures of both East and West.³⁰

Jasanoff focuses, however, upon the 'edge of empire', the 'colonial frontiers' of India and Egypt. In this study, I attempt to bring the idea back to the metropolis, arguing that country houses were sites where British and colonial cultures interacted and, at times, blended.³¹

As a case in point, it is rarely noted that three of Britain's greatest country-house architects – Sir John Vanbrugh, Robert Adam and Sir Edwin Lutyens – can all be closely linked to empire. Sir John Vanbrugh was the son of a Chester-based merchant who dealt in West Indian sugar. His paternal ancestors the Jacobsens were early investors in the East India and Virginia Companies; his aunt Anna's husband, Simon Delhoe, died in Siam; and his uncle Peter was a merchant in Turkey. Vanbrugh initially intended to follow a colonial path himself: in 1683 at the age of nineteen he obtained a writership in the East India Company and spent two years in Surat. The influence of Indian architecture upon his subsequent career remains unclear, for there is no reference to India in Vanbrugh's surviving letters, but Robert Williams, who discovered that Vanbrugh had spent time in India, asserts that he was

the only English architect of the time who had seen for himself . . . the colossal palaces, temples and mausolea of the Mughal empire . . . That he was later victimized by contemporaries for designing country houses which to them seemed Brobdingnagian and incomprehensibly eccentric was surely because only he knew of the monumental scale and ambition of buildings in India, and the stunning effects they achieved.³²

Architectural historians have suggested a number of more specific possible instances of the influence of India upon Vanbrugh's designs. Thomas Rolt bought Sacombe Park near Ware in 1688 after returning from thirty years in India and commissioned Vanbrugh to design the kitchen garden; Kate Harwood speculates that its massive walls may have been inspired by the fortifications that surrounded many Mughal cities.³³ Vaughan Hart compares the pinnacled façade of Blenheim Palace to the Taj Mahal.³⁴ The source of inspiration for the dome at Castle Howard, the first to adorn a private residence in Britain, has always been a mystery, and is usually assumed to be Christopher Wren's dome on St Paul's Cathedral, which was still under construction when

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the building of Castle Howard began in 1699, or the Royal Hospital at Greenwich, on which Vanbrugh's assistant Nicholas Hawksmoor had worked. But Vanbrugh could have seen the domes on the great Mughal buildings of India – is it too much of a stretch to suggest that they played a role in inspiring Castle Howard's?

The influence of empire on Robert Adam's career came via his patrons rather than through first-hand experience. Adam's earliest commission was Hatchlands Park in Surrey, home of Admiral Edward Boscawen, whose naval victories in East Indian, West Indian and North American waters during the Seven Years' War played a key role in the expansion of Britain's maritime and imperial power. Celebrating Boscawen's exploits, Adam incorporated dolphins and figures of Neptune, Justice, Fame and Victory into the ceiling of the library. Adam used a similar theme in his designs for the drawing room at Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, where he began his work in 1759, the 'Year of Victories' in which Britain's fortunes on the battlefield improved dramatically. He inserted seahorses and mermaids into the ceiling plasterwork, while blue damask upholstery and wall hangings completed the nautical effect.³⁵ Among Adam's other important commissions were Harewood House in Yorkshire, home of the Lascelles family, who had made their money from West Indian trade; Osterley Park in Middlesex, home of the Childs, much of whose fortune, as we have previously seen, derived from investment in East India Company stock; and a London town-house for the Countess of Home, who inherited vast wealth from Jamaican sugar plantations upon her husband's death in 1734.

Sir Edwin Lutyens designed numerous country houses before being granted the commission in 1912 to create the main buildings for the new capital of British India at New Delhi. Lutyens disliked Indian architecture, and agreed to incorporate Indian elements into his designs for New Delhi only because he was asked to do so for political reasons by the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge. Only that political imperative explains the creation of elements such as the hybrid 'Delhi order' that Lutyens used for the capitals of his columns. Even so, India exerted an influence over Lutyens's later work. At Gledstone Hall, designed for the cotton manufacturer Sir Amos Nelson while Lutyens was sailing to India in the mid-1920s to complete his work for New Delhi, the marble floors were deeply unsuited to the chilly Yorkshire climate, forcing Sir Amos to keep a coal-stand in the middle of the drawing room. At Middleton Park in Oxfordshire, designed in the late 1930s for the Earl of Jersey and often considered to be the last great country house built in Britain, Lutyens used the Delhi order for the central doorcase of the south front.

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The careers of Vanbrugh, Adam and Lutyens encourage us to think anew about the relationship between country houses and the British Empire. As conduits through which imperial funds and cultural influences flowed, country houses were imperial spaces. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said linked the operations of the titular house in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* to the financial resources generated by the Bertram family's ownership of sugar plantations in the West Indies. Said extended this financial relationship to a metaphorical one that sees the domestic hierarchy as displayed in the social structure of the country house as parallel to imperial rule, at the same time as the latter makes the former possible:

Austen . . . synchronizes domestic with international authority, making it plain that the values associated with such higher things such as ordination, law and propriety must be grounded firmly in actual rule over and possession of territory. She sees clearly that to hold Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial state in close, not to say inevitable association with it. What assures the domestic tranquility of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other.³⁶

Said was interested predominantly in the imposition of European power on the non-western world. Country houses did reflect this kind of imperial relationship, but they also represented more complex forms of interaction between metropolis and colony.

In examining these forms of interaction, this book represents an intervention in the debate over the presence of empire in the British metropolis. In the 1990s, postcolonial scholars began to examine this issue, often coming to conclusions that were quite sweeping. Said argued that in British culture

one may discover a consistency of concern in Spenser, Shakespeare, Defoe and Austen that fixes socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan England or Europe and connects it by design, motive and development to distant or peripheral worlds (Ireland, Venice, Africa, Jamaica), conceived of as desirable but subordinate . . . These structures do not arise from some pre-existing (semi-conspiratorial) design that the writers then manipulate, but are bound up with the development of Britain's cultural identity.³⁷

Historians initially took a more cautious view. P. J. Marshall argued in an essay in the *Times Literary Supplement* that the Empire's impact on eighteenth-century Britain was so 'elusive' as to be frequently invisible.³⁸ Often overlooked, however, is that Marshall went on to explain that 'invisible' did not mean absent:

The Empire, in as far as the British could shape the extremely intractable material presented by the environments and peoples which they

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sought to dominate, reflected and reinforced trends in British history, but rarely seems to have pushed it into radically new directions. Such a conclusion may seem to belittle the importance of empire in British history. But this will only be the case if the imperial experience is interpreted as some influence extraneous to the main course of British history; something imposed on the British people as a transient late Victorian 'age of empire', rather than created by them over two hundred years from the late eighteenth century . . . to the 1950s . . . [The] involvement in empire by wide sections of the British people inevitably took less exotic and less easily distinguishable forms, but the depth and extent of this involvement cannot be in doubt.³⁹

Since then, other historians have pushed these claims further. Angela Woollacott asserts that 'it is now well established that colonialism has been an interconstitutive process that shaped British society and culture'. Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose argue that 'Britain's imperial role and its presence within the metropole shaped peoples' identities as Britons and informed their practical, daily activities'.⁴⁰ Even A. G. Hopkins, a more traditional imperial historian, proclaims that 'images of empire and the imperial ideal . . . entered the British soul and influenced its character'.⁴¹ On a more popular level, Jeremy Paxman narrated a BBC television series in 2011 focusing on 'what ruling the world did to the British'.⁴²

Sceptics remain, however. Bernard Porter has argued that, even in the high imperial period of the nineteenth century, the presence of empire was 'uneven, complex and changeable', making Britain 'a *less* imperial society than is often assumed'. Stephen Howe asserts that 'there are strong grounds for skepticism about the overall impact of the Empire in British life and culture'.⁴³ The debate over the impact of empire thus rages on, with little middle ground: Said saw empire everywhere, but Porter sees it nowhere. This book will attempt to assess the Empire's impact with greater precision regarding two issues: time and space. The chronological parallels between the histories of the British Empire and of British country houses raise questions about conventional arguments regarding the apex of the influence of empire on metropolitan culture. The first half of this book will show that, although it is often assumed that the high Victorian 'Age of Empire' from 1870 to 1900 was the period in which imperial influences were most keenly felt at home, in fact it was an earlier era, from 1760 to 1810, in which far more country houses were built or acquired via imperial wealth. One component of my argument therefore suggests that our traditional chronology of imperial influence on the metropolis needs to be reassessed. This translated into a significant cultural impact in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well.

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This period saw the emergence of several different imperial discourses in British culture, in which the presence of empire was expressed and debated. The second half of this book will trace these discourses as they were manifested in contemporary country houses and as they continued to evolve over the next century.

The second issue that this book will assess in terms of empire's impact on the metropolis is that of geographical space. The distribution of country houses that were acquired with imperial wealth between 1700 and 1930 shows that not all parts of Britain felt that impact equally. In England, purchases were heavily concentrated in the south, while Scotland consistently saw a large number of acquisitions relative to the size of its population. As country houses were highly visible markers of imperial wealth, they would have made Britons living in these parts of the country extremely aware of the Empire's economic impact on the metropolis.

Country houses thus help us to move beyond a simple argument over 'did the Empire matter at home' and allow us to see the complexities and nuances of its presence. The first half of this book will examine the economic impact of empire upon the country-house realm, examining how many houses were purchased with imperial funds, what categories of imperial endeavour the purchasers came from, when the purchases were made and which parts of Britain saw the most, and least, purchases. Chapter 1 looks at colonial merchants, Chapter 2 at Indian nabobs, Chapter 3 at West Indian planters and Chapter 4 at other categories of imperial engagement, including military and naval officers, stock investors, women and returnees from Britain's settlement colonies. A brief concluding chapter, Chapter 5, assesses the overall picture of country houses acquired via imperial means between 1700 and 1930.

The second half of the book looks at the cultural impact of empire upon country houses, showing that it was extensive but varied. Chapter 6 traces the broad contours of this impact, showing how it changed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The next four Chapters (7–10) look at four different discourses of empire that country houses reflected and expressed: commodities, cosmopolitanism, conquest and collecting. Taken in sum, these chapters will demonstrate the myriad ways in which empire was displayed in British country houses. Between 1700 and 1930, empire was neither omnipresent nor omni-absent in British culture. Its impact waxed and waned in different places at different times, and it was expressed in countless ways and countless forms. This book will help us to assess this, through the lens of country houses.

The division of the book into these two halves is in no way meant to suggest that the economic and cultural realms were entirely distinct.

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It is central to my argument that these two arenas were inextricably linked, and that the economic impact of empire enhanced its cultural impact. A country house that was purchased with imperial funds was a very large, very powerful, very physical symbol of the wealth that the Empire could generate, a symbolism that was rendered all the more potent when it displayed imperial architectural influences or contained imperial commodities and decorative objects. The parts of Britain that saw the greatest concentration of country-house purchases from imperial wealth likely saw the greatest cultural influence as well, as the same men who bought landed estates with imperial funds were likely to have access to trade networks through which colonial goods could be acquired. In the early eighteenth century, for example, the nabob Elihu Yale, whose family seat was at Plas Grono in North Wales, acquired Indian objects for two of his neighbours at nearby Erddig: a lacquered screen for Joshua Edisbury and, after Edisbury sold the house in 1714, Chinese silk bed hangings for the new owner, John Meller.⁴⁴ The economic and cultural realms of imperial influence on the metropolis were thus closely linked.

Finally, a few specifications and definitions. This book concerns all four nations – England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland – that comprised the geographical entity of the British Isles between 1700 and 1930. I have attempted to treat them in some ways as sharing certain characteristics in terms of the relationship between country houses and empire, but in others as having distinctively national forms of engagement. The decision to encompass all of them, including Ireland, means that some difficulties of geographical nomenclature are unavoidable. I have occasionally used the term ‘British Isles’ to describe the land mass of the four nations, even though I know many Irish people would prefer an alternative. Similarly, I have used ‘United Kingdom’ to describe them politically, though I recognise that Ireland was only part of that entity between 1800 and 1922, and not for the entire period in question. I also refer repeatedly to ‘British’ country houses, and to a variety of other ‘British’ things, when in reality I mean ‘British and Irish’. To do anything else would hopelessly clutter the text, though I recognise that it is both historically inaccurate and politically insensitive.

These are problems that confront, and confound, all British historians. More specific to this study is the issue of what, exactly, constitutes a country house. There is no established, technical definition of the term. I have, I admit, opted to use a fairly broad conception, and have included suburban villas as well as immense country piles in my counts and analyses. If these lead to accusations that my evaluation of the number of country houses that were purchased from

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imperial wealth is too high, I will say in my defence that, first, the vast majority of houses in my count are of sufficient scale that agreement on their status as ‘country houses’ would be near-universal and, second, I have been extremely conservative in deciding to include a house in the count at all. I have left off a large number of houses that I suspect were purchased from imperial wealth but for which I could not find clear evidence to that effect. I listed very few houses that were acquired by nineteenth-century industrialists, because even if imperial markets supplied a significant part of their revenues, it is impossible to untangle the imperial and non-imperial strands of their business operations in any clear-cut way. And finally, there are doubtless hundreds of houses that were purchased from imperial wealth of which, despite my thorough search of archives, local histories and other sources, I am utterly unaware.

In the appendices, I have attempted to compile a large amount of information regarding the names, locations, owners, dates of purchase or construction and other aspects of the more than a thousand houses that I have identified as having been funded by imperial sources. There are, doubtless, numerous errors, particularly regarding the dates. Country-house records can be surprisingly evasive regarding basic matters such as their year of construction. I intend for my list to serve only as a starting point. I look forward to both expanding and correcting it in the future, with the assistance of the readers of this book. In the meantime, however, I am hopeful that my list, as well as my more descriptive and analytical work, will serve to advance the scholarly discussion about the relationship between country houses and the British Empire.

Notes

- 1 The earliest bell-pull systems appeared in British country houses before 1750. One of the first examples was at Kiveton House in Yorkshire, where a system had been installed by 1727, as it appeared in an inventory of that year. Tessa Murdoch, *Noble Households: Eighteenth-Century Inventories of Great English Houses* (Oxford: John Adamson, 2007), p. 26.
- 2 <http://nttreasurehunt.wordpress.com/category/osterley-park>.
- 3 The connections between country houses and empire have begun to be explored. In 2007, English Heritage attempted to identify the connections between its properties and slavery, as a means of marking the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade. Twenty-six properties were discovered to have such connections, leading to the commissioning of detailed reports on four country houses: Bolsover Castle, Brodsworth Hall, Marble Hill and Northington Grange. In 2009, these findings and other work on the subject were presented at the conference ‘Slavery and the Country House’, held at the London School of Economics and sponsored by English Heritage, the National Trust and the University of the West of England. Selected papers from the conference have been published as *Slavery and the British Country House*, Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, eds (London: English Heritage, 2013). University

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College London is home to the research project The East India Company at Home, which features a still-expanding series of case studies focusing on individuals, families, houses and objects. See <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/>. Also at University College London is the project Legacies of British Slave-Ownership, which details links between slavery and numerous country houses in its section titled 'Physical Legacies'. See www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/physical/.

- 4 Peter Mandler, *Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 8–9. See also Dana Arnold, 'The Country House and Its Publics', in Dana Arnold, ed., *The Georgian Country House: Architecture: Landscape and Society* (Thrup, Stroud: Sutton, 1998), pp. 20–42.
- 5 Adrian Tinniswood, *The Polite Tourist: Four Centuries of Country House Visiting* (London: National Trust, 1998), pp. 152 and 164.
- 6 William H. A. Williams writes, 'Try as they might to dazzle visitors with their displays of power clothed in taste, the tourists often refused to be passive admirers'. William H. A. Williams, *Tourism, Landscape and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p. 29.
- 7 Kari Boyd McBride, *Country House Discourse in Early Modern England: A Cultural Study of Landscape and Legitimacy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 136.
- 8 Kay Dian Kriz observes that studies of the Grand Tour fail to view it 'within a larger network of international travel and exchange that involved the circulation of bodies and luxury goods not only within Western Europe, but also between the European powers and their overseas colonies, and between Western Europe and other nation states'. Kay Dian Kriz, 'Introduction: The Grand Tour', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31 (1997), p. 87.
- 9 Charles Saumarez Smith, 'Supply and Demand in English Country House Building 1660–1740', *Oxford Art Journal* 11:2 (1988), p. 4.
- 10 See Sir John Summerson, 'The Classical Country House in Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 107 (1959), pp. 539–87.
- 11 For the decline of the country house, see Roy Strong, ed., *The Destruction of the Country House, 1875–1975* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974).
- 12 David Cannadine criticises the idea that country houses are national cultural possessions: 'The committees of the great preservationist societies were – and still are – groaning beneath the weight of great grandees. The idea of a "national" heritage which is somehow "threatened" and must be "saved" is sometimes little more than a means of preserving an essentially elite culture by claiming – quite implausibly – that it is really everybody's. The claim is usually accompanied by a highly value-laden version of the past, not so much history as myth.' David Cannadine, 'Brideshead Revisited', *The New York Review of Books*, 19 December 1985, p. 1.
- 13 Christopher Hussey, 'Syon House, Middlesex', *Country Life* CVIII (2811), 1 December 1950, p. 1873.
- 14 Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, p. 1.
- 15 Vita Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (London, 1922), pp. 2 and 11.
- 16 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), p. 79.
- 17 Kent History and Library Centre, Sackville Manuscripts, U269/E5, pp. 1–2.
- 18 Blake died of fever in Canton in 1773, and so Wang-y-Tong must have been sent to Knole prior to that date. Reynolds painted his portrait in 1776, as a payment for seventy guineas is recorded in his ledger of accounts for August of that year. Jane Kilpatrick, *Gifts from the Gardens of China* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2007), pp. 79–80; and David Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 461.
- 19 Kent History and Library Centre, Sackville Manuscripts, U269/E4 and U269 E5, p. 35.
- 20 Warnoton was the nickname given to Wang-y-Tong by Knole's servants. Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, p. 461; and Kent History and Library Centre, Sackville Manuscripts, U269/E5, p. 35.

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- 21 Her memory of the portrait was faulty, as the boy sits with his legs crossed Indian-style rather than 'squatting on his heels'. Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles*, p. 191.
- 22 Mark Bence-Jones, *Life in an Irish Country House* (London: Constable, 1996), p. 88.
- 23 Lady Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals*, ed. Lennox Robinson (London: Putnam, 1946), pp. 15 and 340.
- 24 Brian Friel, *Aristocrats: A Play in Three Acts* (New York: Samuel French, 1980), p. 44.
- 25 The precise number of houses that were burned remains in dispute. See Mark Bence-Jones, *Burke's Guide to Country Houses, Volume I: Ireland* (London: Burke's Peerage, 1978), p. xxi; James S. Donnelly, Jr., 'Big House Burnings in County Cork during the Irish Revolution, 1920–21', *Éire-Ireland* 47 (2012), p. 142; Terence A. M. Dooley, *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland: A Study of Irish Landed Families, 1860–1960*, 2nd edn (Dublin: Wolfhound, 2001), p. 286; and Peter Somerville-Large, *The Irish Country House: A Social History* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1995), p. 353.
- 26 Lady Gregory, *Coole* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1931), pp. 4–5.
- 27 W. B. Yeats, 'Dramatis Personae', in William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald, eds, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Vol. III: Autobiographies* (New York: Scribner, 1999), pp. 292–3.
- 28 Lady Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals*, p. 15.
- 29 Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: On the Inadequacy and the Indispensability of the Nation', in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 5.
- 30 Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Cultures and Conquest in the East, 1750–1850* (New York: Vintage, 2005), p. 4.
- 31 Christopher Bayly writes that 'all local, national or regional histories must, in important ways, . . . be global histories'. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1789–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 2.
- 32 Robert Williams, 'A Factor in his Success', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5031 (3 September 1999), p. 13.
- 33 Kate Harwood, 'Some Hertfordshire Nabobs', in Anne Rowe, ed., *Hertfordshire Garden History: A Miscellany* (Hatfield, Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2007), p. 53.
- 34 Vaughan Hart, *Sir John Vanbrugh: Storyteller in Stone* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 102.
- 35 Eileen Harris, *The Country Houses of Robert Adam* (London: Aurum, 2008), pp. 39–40.
- 36 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 87.
- 37 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 52.
- 38 P. J. Marshall, 'No Fatal Impact? The Elusive History of Imperial Britain', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4693, 12 March 1993, p. 8.
- 39 Marshall, 'No Fatal Impact?' p. 8.
- 40 Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 9; and Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, eds, 'Introduction', in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 22.
- 41 A. G. Hopkins, 'Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History', *Past and Present* 164 (1999), p. 214.
- 42 Jeremy Paxman, *Empire: What Ruling the World Did to the British* (London: Viking, 2011), p. 3.
- 43 Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: What the British Really Thought about Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. xv; and Stephen Howe, 'Internal Decolonization? British Politics since Thatcher as Post-Colonial Trauma', *Twentieth-Century British History* 14 (2003), p. 298.
- 44 Oliver Garnett, *Erddig* (Swindon: National Trust, 1995), p. 71.