

Book Reviews

Post-1800

FELICITY BARNES. *Selling Britishness: Commodity Culture, the Dominions, and Empire*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. Pp. 264. \$130.00 (cloth).
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The story of empire marketing during the interwar years has been written largely through studies of the London-based Empire Marketing Board, which existed between 1926 and 1933. Among other objectives, the Empire Marketing Board encouraged British consumers to buy more products from the United Kingdom and the wider empire in preference to foreign goods. Since the mid-1980s a series of studies have explored the board's shortcomings, from the difficulties it faced in securing funding (the Canadian government was a persistent critic) to the apparently negligible influence it had in changing consumer behavior.

Felicity Barnes, by contrast, takes a welcome alternative approach in *Selling Britishness: Commodity Culture, the Dominions, and Empire*. She focuses on the efforts of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand's to run commodity marketing campaigns in Britain, which predated the Empire Marketing Board and grew in intensity following its demise. While much of the established literature relies heavily on British sources and assumes that the United Kingdom was central to efforts promoting the cause of buying imperial goods, Barnes convincingly argues that the Dominions played a leading role in developing commodity marketing.

Through a series of engaging case studies, Barnes explores how the Dominions' marketing campaigns sought to construct an image of these nations in the minds of UK consumers as "more British than imperial" (18). Campaigns with titles such as "Canada Calling Liverpool" encouraged the notion that the Dominions were similar in character to Britain and culturally distinct from the rest of the empire. The campaigns also used exclusion. With very few exceptions, these nations' Indigenous peoples remained absent from campaign literature while images of healthy, masculine, white settlers were omnipresent.

With *Selling Britishness*, Barnes makes a valuable contribution to various debates about relations between the United Kingdom and the wider British world in the first half of the

twentieth century. For example, Barnes persuasively argues that the Dominions' efforts to use film to promote their exports were already well established long before John Grierson pioneered efforts to promote imperial cooperation in documentary filmmaking (chapter 4). Likewise, the Ilots and Haines archives are employed to good effect to demonstrate that the Dominions' advertising presence in London rivaled that of better-known American firms such as J. Walter Thompson, cutting across tired debates that have focused on the supposed Americanization of British marketing operations from the 1920s onward (chapter 6).

Barnes undoubtedly offers an important intervention into debates about the popular culture of Britishness, shifting attention to the role of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand as advocates of imperial trade cooperation. Promoting close cultural bonds with Britain via marketing campaigns made sense when so few alternative markets were available due to high tariff barriers. However, it is important to note that alternative messages could be targeted at home consumers. During the 1930s the Canadian Department of Trade and Commerce simultaneously presented Canada to Britons as a supplier of abundant agricultural produce while encouraging Canadians to buy manufactured goods produced by their own countrymen as a means to alleviate unemployment.

While Barnes notes that South Africa did undertake some small-scale marketing of its agricultural produce in Britain during the 1930s, its reluctance to engage in the type of campaigns undertaken by the other three main Dominions is intriguing and worthy of further study. British export organizations' efforts to promote empire shopping weeks in Cape Town received a cool reception. It may not be surprising that South Africans were reluctant to market themselves as a model British Dominion during these years of Afrikaner cultural revival.

Barnes offers a compelling argument in claiming that the main importance of commodity marketing was to promote particular ideas of how the empire functioned, which encouraged Britons to see the Dominions as home-like. Authors of previous studies have been too willing to dismiss the significance of these campaigns given their questionable record in changing consumer behavior over the long term. In any case, it should be remembered that the Empire Marketing Board never accounted for more than 4 percent of annual advertising expenditure in the United Kingdom.

Barnes's most notable achievement in *Selling Britishness* is to challenge the metropolitan focus of much of the literature that has explored the popular culture of imperial trade. The challenge for authors of future studies is to consider more closely how the ideas of empire produced by empire marketeers were taken up by civil society organizations and how they competed with alternative appeals directed toward consumers at home and abroad. Barnes confines her attention to the pre-1940 period but notes that empire marketing appears to have dwindled as a cause after the Second World War. For all the vividness of the different campaigns discussed, the evidence she presents suggests they appear never to have created a genuine popular cause with mass support. There is a striking contrast here with the grassroots movement that developed in defense of free trade in Edwardian Britain as documented by Frank Trentmann in *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (2008). The cause of "selling Britishness" may have superseded Britain's career as a free trade nation, but it is perhaps not surprising that it struggled for attention in the austerity years after the Second World War, when the patriotic imperative for members of the Sterling Area was to reduce reliance on imports and earn valuable dollars in export markets.

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