



Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire. Decolonization, Society, and Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, xii + 551 pp., ISBN 9780 521131889).

With *Europe after Empire*, Elizabeth Buettner aims to provide her readership with several histories in one single book: a review of the various decolonisation experiences ‘overseas’ (part I of the book), a study of the various postcolonial migrations which came with decolonisation and which contributed to the emergence of multicultural societies in Western Europe (part II) and a concluding essay discussing contemporary legacies and memories of empire (part III). All of this is set in a comparative framework, incorporating the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal and their former empires. The book was written for both ‘experts in their respective fields as well as advanced students’, and was published in Cambridge UP’s textbook series *New Approaches to European History*.

For several reasons, Buettner succeeds admirably in her purpose. No such study existed until to now, incorporating these five national-imperial cases into one single book. Even for historians specialising in these themes it is a nightmare to keep track of the ever-expanding body of literature usually looking only at one of the various cases. I for one would have greatly benefited from reading this book when I was doing research for the comparative chapter of my own *Postcolonial Netherlands* (2011). There was simply nothing like Buettner’s book at the time, so one needed to delve into each of the various (post)imperial cases one by one. That’s all over now – the more so as the overviews Buettner provides of the various cases are well-argued and testify to a thorough command of the relevant historiography. For students, the book may be a bit overly packed with information, but then again, there is fortunately little of the jargon that often makes studies in postcolonial themes so hard to digest.

This is not to say that Buettner does not engage with the theoretical literature. Her ‘Introduction’ is a solid introduction to new interpretations of colonial and postcolonial history, inserting this book in the traditions of new imperial history. Clearly Buettner aims to contribute to a Europe that is postcolonial in the sense that it has ‘examined this past’ and has undone its ideological heritage (6), but she does not nurture easy illusions. Near the end of her book, she writes that ‘[r]eckoning with the imperial past in Europe remains unfinished business, a series of periodic, piecemeal, and unsystematic engagements’ (490). At the same time, throughout the book she demonstrates how both decolonisation and postcolonial migrations have changed the ways the increasingly multicultural nations of Western Europa

imagine their colonial pasts. As the 30-pages bibliography attests, *Europe after Empire* is a book based on decades of reading and writing about decolonisation and postcolonial migrations. One of the ways in which Buettner attempts to offer more than just a solid summary of all of these works is by providing analyses and citations of individuals on all sides of the spectrum, taken from the media, autobiographies, and the like. This certainly makes for vivid reading, though at times the question arises whether a particular voice really represents anything but herself/himself. Thus, I was a bit taken aback by Buettner's extensive citations of former Dutch politician Gerbrandy, whose extremely reactionary views now make for good reading, but who, as Buettner fails to note, has become a marginal figure in Dutch post-War politics.

A book like this may easily become so packed with information that one gets lost in its overload. Certainly any reader of this book will also occasionally feel exhausted by the sheer volume of facts and analyses, but the book is well-written and has a very personal touch. Perhaps at times Buettner conflates her personal convictions a bit too strongly with what is written down as a neutral observation, in passages such as 'Within European nations [...] profound tensions divide those at the vanguard who are spearheading this dynamic process – or simply responding positively to it – from those seeking to protect “authentic” national cultures (no matter how imaginary) from change (no matter how inevitable).' (413). One might wonder whether such categorisations between 'we in the vanguard' and 'those that still do not understand' really contribute anything to the objectives that underpin Buettner's writing – but fortunately, such passages are not omnipresent.

In all, *Europe after Empire* is a major achievement. Elizabeth Buettner, now Professor of Modern History at the University of Amsterdam, wrote an erudite and engaging study which I recommend to anyone interested in the comparative history of European decolonisation and its legacies, a history which will continue to impact much of these individual Western European countries, and even the European project as such, for decades to come.

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