

*Routledge Studies in Modern British History*

# **LEGACIES OF AN IMPERIAL CITY**

**THE MUSEUM OF LONDON 1976–2007**

Samuel Aylett



# Legacies of an Imperial City

This comprehensive history of the Museum of London traces the ways that the relationship between Britain and its imperial past has changed over the course of three decades, providing a holistic approach to galleries' shifts from Victorian nostalgia to equitable representations.

At its 1976 opening, the Museum of London differed from other museums in its treatment of empire and colonialism as central to its galleries. In response to the public's evolving social and political attitudes, the museum's 1993–1994 'The Peopling of London' exhibition marked a new approach in creating inclusive displays, which explore the impact of immigration and multiculturalism on British history. Through photos, planning documents, and archival research, this book analyses museums' role in enacting change in the public's understanding of history, and this book is the first to critically engage with the Museum of London's theme of empire, particularly in consideration of recent exhibitions.

*Legacies of an Imperial City* is a useful resource for academics and researchers of postcolonial history and museum studies, as well as any student of urban history.

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**Samuel Aylett**

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# Abbreviations

ACE	Arts and Crafts in Education
AHD	Authorised Heritage Discourse
ANL	Anti-Nazi League
BAME	Black Asian Minority Ethnic
BECC	Black Emergency Cultural Coalition
BECM	British Empire and Commonwealth Museum
BHS	Brooklyn Historical Society
BMAG	Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
BNP	British National Party
BPA	Black People's Alliance
CAMOC	International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities
CNER	Centre for New Ethnicities Research
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
GLC	Greater London Council
HLF	Heritage Lottery Fund
ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
ISML	International Slavery Museum Liverpool
LCC	London County Council
LDDC	London Docklands Development Corporation
LSS	London, Sugar and Slavery
MHDT	Mayor's Heritage Diversity Taskforce
MiDP	Museum in Docklands Project
MoL	Museum of London
MoLD	Museum of London Docklands
PLA	Port of London Authority
THACMHO	Tower Hamlets African Caribbean Mental Health Organisation
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific Cultural Organisation

**Part One**

**The Origin Story 1826–1976**





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# 1 Introduction

## Museums and Empire

### Introduction

Opened in 1976 by Queen Elizabeth II, the Museum of London (MoL) was an amalgamation of the London Museum (1912) and the Guildhall Museum (founded 1826), both prominent institutions with collections covering archaeological antiquities, the built city and urban development. The London Museum also held contemporary collections relating to London's working life. As London's foremost metropolitan museum, the MoL had focused chiefly on the lived experiences of London's white British inhabitants over the last 250 years, and London's pre-history. In 1993, the Museum launched their temporary exhibition 'The Peopling of London 15,000 Years of Settlement from Overseas.' The title's emphasis on 'from overseas' and the exhibition content signalled the MoL's engagement with multicultural histories of London and the beginning of the Museum's exploration of the legacies of empire. Local historian Sylvia Collicott remarked that 'Peopling' was important not least 'that for the first time a major museum in London had addressed the truly multicultural history of London life.'<sup>1</sup>

Not long after the MoL opened, the Museum in Docklands Project (MiD-P), which had begun life as a collecting programme under the auspices of the MoL in 1979, came under the supervision of a newly established independent trust responsible for establishing a new museum. In 1982, the MoL drew up plans for a new museum with exhibitions on the history of the Dock area, its decline through containerisation and the working history of the Dock.<sup>2</sup> As plans to develop a new museum got underway, the MiD-P began to work closely with the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) and Port of London Authority (PLA hereafter) to create travelling exhibitions that told the story of the Docks up to the closure of the West India Docks in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> In 1994, the MoL co-opted the MiD-P's mobile museum trailer for 'Peopling,' which will be discussed later. At the same time, in 1994, LDDC Joint Chief Executive Roger Squire and MoL Director Max Hebditch announced the return of a statue of Robert Milligan – former deputy chairman of the West Indian Dock – to the West India Quay outside what would become the MoLD.

Born in Dumfries c. 1746, Robert Milligan was a Scottish merchant and slave trader in Jamaica, before helping to establish the West India Docks in London. In

#### 4 *The Origin Story 1826–1976*

acknowledgement of Milligan's role in establishing the West India Docks, a statue was erected in 1813, near the entrance to the docks, with a plaque which read:

[t]o perpetuate on this spot the memory of Robert Milligan a merchant of London, to whose genius, perseverance and guardian care the surrounding great work principally owes its design, accomplishment and regulation.<sup>4</sup>

The statue was moved to the Main Gate in 1875 and then placed in storage in 1943, before being returned to its original site in 1997. As Kate Donington has argued, the statue has long been a controversial part of the built environment of the West India Docks. When the 'London, Sugar, Slavery' exhibition was opened in 2007 as part of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, the statue was veiled.<sup>5</sup> This exhibition will be discussed at length later in the book.

In June 2020, in the wake of the Black Lives Matters protests, statues associated with the history of empire and imperialism, and the history of slavery in America and Europe, became lightning rods around which protestors coalesced to demand their removal. Not long after the statue of Edward Colston met its pelagic downfall at Bristol Harbour on June 7, 2020, the statue of Robert Milligan was removed by local authorities. A spokesperson from the MoLD stated that 'the monument is part of the ongoing problematic regime of white-washing history, which disregards the pain of those who are still wrestling with the remnants of the crimes Milligan committed against humanity.' The statue is now in storage, where it will remain as discussions take place on how best to display the statue at the Museum. In its place, the Canal and River Trust, which owned the land on which the statue stood, will develop a 'proposal for the future use of the dock-side plinth to reflect the diversity and values of the local community.'<sup>6</sup>

In many ways this book is about change; that is, the discursive limitations of museums. Simon Knell argues that change in museums can be characterised as much by the adopting of norms, or even incremental change around more general inertia, as by 'revolutionary change.'<sup>7</sup> Museums are constantly in flux. How is it that three years after 'Peopling' set new precedents for engaging with London's multicultural present and its imperial past, a statue of a slave trader was erected outside its sister institution? This book aims to provide a comprehensive study of the origins, nature and impact of the MoL, and its interaction with the theme of empire, decolonisation and the postcolonial throughout its history (and the history of its progenitor institutions). More specifically, it presents an extended case study of the MoL's 1993 temporary exhibition, 'The Peopling of London: 15,000 Years of Settlement from Overseas' to address when, why and how representations of empire and colonialism at the MoL began to change. The cumulative picture is a complex, sometimes ambiguous, relationship between the Museum and London's colonial past. Before the planned move of the MoL to the abandoned Smithfield's Market in 2023, a reassessment of the Museum (and the MoLD), its history and its social role are timely. This book will provide a fitting look back on how the Museum has met the challenge of representing the multicultural realities of London in the postcolonial era.

What, then, was the historical legacy of museum representation and acknowledgement of empire that the MoL inherited when it began to consider its 1993 ‘Peopling’ exhibition? Critical assessments of this relationship between museums and empire have emphasised museums’ long historical associations with empire-building. Formative studies that have addressed this relationship from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century have focused principally on national and regional museums, arguing that since the eighteenth-century museums have mirrored the socio-political arguments for the necessity of empire.

## Museums and Empire

The so-called universal type museum emerged in the eighteenth century in lock-step with the march of empire.<sup>8</sup> The British Museum (founded 1753), like other prominent museums at the time, including the Ashmolean (1683), the Glasgow Hunterian Museums (1807) and the South Kensington Museum (1855), was furnished by the spoils of imperial expansion, ‘wherever in the British Empire railways and roads, telegraphs and modes of exploitation of the environment advanced, surveyors and engineers, miners and farmers were inevitably sucked into the fascinations of geology, palaeontology and archaeology.’<sup>9</sup> The technologies of colonialisation could, therefore, be seen as contributing to the national storehouse of knowledge, a knowledge rooted in imperial expansion.

Individual collectors and their social and material networks were equally, if not more so, instrumental in establishing these museums from the eighteenth century and drove this quest for the universalisation of knowledge rooted in imperial conquest. More recent museum histories have moved away from traditional narrative histories of museums to focus on the social and material networks that constituted museums from the eighteenth century onwards. This shift in focus has been precipitated by such works as Gosden and Larson’s *Knowing things: exploring the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum 1884–1945* (2007), which charted the social and material connections in the foundation of the Pitt Rivers Museum to demonstrate the relational nature of museums.<sup>10</sup> Whilst these works have developed our methodological approaches to museum histories, they have been criticised for failing to address the violence that permeated these relational connections. Dan Hicks responded directly to the ‘relational museum’ project in his book *The British Museum* (2021) to condemn its over-emphasis on object biographies and the relational nature of museums in sustaining the erasure of the history of colonial violence in the Victorian period.<sup>11</sup> Works published after the ‘relational museum’ project, such as James Delbourgo’s biography of Hans Sloane *Collecting the World* (2017), have placed empire, and its violence, at the centre of these histories.<sup>12</sup> Unpacking these institutional, social and material relationships between museums and empire has been the focus of scholars for more than three decades.

Formative books including, such as Barringer and Flynn’s *Colonialism and the Object* (1988), influenced as they were by post-colonial critiques, expanded our understanding of the influence of colonialism on museum objects and material culture more broadly; how material culture tells us something about the societies

that produce and consume them, and transactional inequities between coloniser and the colonised.<sup>13</sup> *Colonialism and the Object*, and formative museum histories, in particular works such as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's *Museum and Disciplinary Societies* (1989), with their emphasis on power revealed through the museum and material culture, were heavily influenced by Foucault's concept of the disciplinary society. Seeing Museums as technologies, which allowed the state to 'survey, classify, and control time, space, bodies and things,' these works endorsed the idea of a centrally organised imperial museum project.<sup>14</sup> As Sarah Longair has argued, these earlier studies, which focused on the 'exertion and entrenchment of power relations,' naturally lent themselves to the study of museum in a colonial context, for example Bernard Cohn's *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (1996) placed museums alongside the census as a disciplinary technology of empire, and led scholars to view the museum as intimately 'tied with the exercise of power . . . bounded by a series of underlying dichotomies between coloniser and colonised.'<sup>15</sup> Moving away from these studies, which misunderstood the 'particular and peculiar workings of museums' in diverse temporal and geographical contexts, more recent scholarship has focused on the specific historical context of individual institutions.<sup>16</sup> Focusing for the first time on city museums, and contemporary representations, this book will contribute to this more recent scholarship.

Building not only on Flynn and Barringer's work but also on formative cultural histories, like John Mackenzie's *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities* (2009), so-called New Imperial Histories have enriched our understanding of the nature and context of imperial collections. Two seminal collections, published under the Manchester University Press Studies in Imperialism, *Art and the British Empire* (2007) and *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience* (2012), illustrated the relationship between museums, display and how the British public came to understand their empire and their place within it. For example, Eleanor Hughes, in her study of marine paintings hung at the Royal Academy in 1784, shows how works like Dominic Serres' which depicted British naval victories, when juxtaposed with history paintings depicting royal personages and Shakespearean subjects, were situated within the national story to bolster 'national self-regard in the aftermath of devastating territorial loss by prompting the public to reconceive Britain as a maritime empire.'<sup>17</sup> Conversely, John McAleer's study of Thomas Baines, a marine painter who curated the Africa Display at the King's Lynn Athenaeum inauguration of 1854, in which he curated his own work depicting his time as David Livingstone's exhibition to the Zambezi alongside works on loan from the London Society of Art's Indian, African and Chinese Collections, and which also featured a 'miniature display of an African glen on the Kat River, in which the Hottentot rebellions broke out in 1850,' were contextualised for visitors in part by the frequent appearances of the Eight Frontier War (1850–1853). This, McAleer argues, would have furnished the public with a particular understanding of Baines' display and collections within a broader imperial context. Here, as with similar exhibitions and displays, curators used the museum to create visual displays of the colonies and empire for British visitors.<sup>18</sup> Thus, museums and their exhibitions were not neutral

participants in empire, and in dissemination of the other, but were intertwined with the ‘promotion of commerce and consequently, the development of empire’ and a wider imperial culture.<sup>19</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, museums and exhibitions were transformed into visual explanations of empire, and Britain’s national identity.

As the number of museums in Britain increased in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a greater interest in the material past developed alongside the emergence of antiquarian and archaeological societies. Archaeological and anthropology museums emerged from the violence of empire, which has been illustrated in more recent works such as Dan Hicks’ *The British Museums* (2019). Informed by the ‘explanatory powers’ and the alleged ‘epistemological transparency of objects,’<sup>20</sup> and underwritten by colonial violence, which saw the looting of so much of, for example, African material heritage, anthropology and archaeology museums, like the Pitt Rivers Museums in Oxford, founded in 1884, developed new evolutionary taxonomies, which organised their collections to emphasise the progress of cultures from savagery to civilisation to reify the West’s superiority in contrast to the other engendering racial hierarchies. New Imperial Histories, and more recent museological works, have developed on this discourse about the relationship between museums and empire, acknowledging museums as rich sites for understanding imperial citizenry in a range of British museums from the eighteenth century, and how visitors’ readings of colonial objects and displays, and their subsequent understanding of empire, were contextualised by a wider imperial culture that emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

The great exhibitions and world’s fairs, such as the 1886 Colonial and India Exhibition in particular, were expressions of the growing popular imperialism, which amalgamated this idea of cultural progress.<sup>22</sup> As John MacKenzie argued, popular imperialism, expressed through exhibitions, poster art, the music halls, literature and moving pictures, created for the British ‘a world view which was central to their perceptions of themselves.’ This emerged in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and coalesced around a renewed militarism, devotion to royalty, identification and worship of national heroes, and racial ideas associated with social Darwinism.<sup>23</sup> Mackenzie goes on to argue that museums and the great exhibitions offered pleasure mixed with instruction and were suffused with imperial themes representing a national obsession with all things exotic and imperial. These exhibitions and museums emerged alongside an intensified imperial propaganda that Mackenzie argued saturated British culture. It is worth noting that the 1924–1925 Wembley Exhibition attracted more than 27 million visits.<sup>24</sup> In this way, museums and the great exhibitions have been used to highlight how the public came to know about their empire, and that the empire was seen as something conducive to British prosperity.

Andrew Thompson has argued that the influence of empire on British culture was complex and there was no ‘single monolithic imperial culture in Britain.’<sup>25</sup> In turn, those works referenced earlier, such as Longair and McAleer’s *Curating Empire*, in which scholars have questioned the individual museums and their specific historical context, focused attention on trying to understand visitors’

experience and their understanding of imperial collections and displays. Take Claire Wintle's study of the Royal Pavilions and Museums in Brighton from 1900 to 1950. Wintle argues that visitors understood collections of non-European material culture at the Royal Pavilion and Museums, and thus their understanding of the 'people of their empire,' by drawing on wider local cultural references. In the first half of the twentieth century, Brighton was a popular place for the returning colonial elite, where the local charity bazaars and lantern shows, with their imperial motifs, provided a 'sociable, dynamic environment, ripe for individual involvement and group participation,' in which locals furnished their understanding of those 'people of their empire.' Wintle argues that the museum provided an official interpretation of empire, albeit messy and unintelligible, but that visitors were able to make it intelligible because of their wider cultural experiences.<sup>26</sup> Thus, visitors ascribed their own meaning, material culture and imperial collections, which in turn helped them to understand their relative position as imperial citizens.

This turn towards the visitor in museum studies and museum history is relevant inasmuch as much of this book is about how visitors understand histories of empire and colonialism as displayed at the MoL. This shift in museum studies and museum histories to focus on the visitor was precipitated in part by Bourdieu and Darbel's 1966 study of European Museums *The Love of Art* (1966), which concluded there was a causal relationship between those who visited art galleries and their level of cultural capital; an individual's level of education not only is the sum total of their schooling but is also predicated on an individual's social stratification through which an individual developed their social and cultural education.<sup>27</sup> The greater their cultural capital, the greater their likelihood to engage in culture. Bourdieu and Darbel's study was not recognised in the United Kingdom until the 1980s, at which time the New Museology movement emerged, which turned scholars' attention to the role of visitors and the ways in which they were active meaning-makers. This focus on the visitor diminished the idea that visitors were empty vessels waiting for knowledge. The visitor in turn will be discussed in greater detail in my discussion around the usefulness of visitor comment books in Chapter 7. What is important here is that such studies are indicative of an obligation to consider the visitor in negotiating histories of museums and material culture.

Turning to London, once the hub of empire, which is the backdrop for this book not least because much of what is considered imperial architecture and material legacies remains in plain sight today, was shot through with empire. Cultural histories of empire inspired by Anthony King and Doreen Massey, which argued for a recognition of the way in which the identity of places in the modern world are informed as much by their relationship to other places, have analysed the way in which global processes of imperialism shaped the modern European City.<sup>28</sup> London, Felix Driver and Adam Gilbert argue in *Imperial Cities* (1999), was a place in which a variety of imperial sights could be seen, and in which aspects of empire including 'political authority, commercial power, cosmopolitan consumption, scientific progress, popular display' were represented by different urban sites, such as Admiralty Arch at Westminster.<sup>29</sup> Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose have gone even further and argued that domestically, empire was never entirely

off the political and civic agenda from the 1770s and critical to the development of metropolitan culture.<sup>30</sup> Rather than considering whether empire had an impact, like Mackenzie and Thompson's work, they are concerned with how empire was lived through everyday life in London. What is interesting here, and important for this book, is how many of the essays in both Driver and Gilbert's and Hall and Rose's show how visitors often subvert official interpretations.

Take Deborah S. Ryan's essay on 'Staging the Imperial City: The Pageant of London 1911' (1999). Ryan argues that the elaborate displays, which told the history of London from pre-history to colonial power, were designed intentionally, with educational and imperial propagandist agendas, to stage the City of London as the imperial capital, the 'seat of national government at the heart of the British Empire.' Pageants often recreated the far-flung reaches of empire allowing visitors and pageanteers to explore the colonies. Performing the role of travellers, visitors could take the 'All Red Tour,' which would take people on a mile and a half trip by electric railway through the overseas colonies, which Ryan argues instilled in people a sense of colonial progress, how to be a part of empire and how empire was a part of them.<sup>31</sup> Ryan also argues that participation allowed some to subvert this meaning. Fifteen thousand volunteers from across London's boroughs meant that there were conflicting local identities. Each borough oversaw their own scene and as a result, suburban rivalries, personal aims and objectives and individual's meanings influenced participants' experience.<sup>32</sup> Whatever wider culture of empire existed in this period, there was a tangible decline in a popular imperial spirit over the twentieth century despite remnants of London as an imperial city hiding plain sight in Britain.

Decolonisation, a process visible from the 1940s with the independence of India and which came to an end in the 1960s in which no fewer than 17 nations declared their independence in Sub-Saharan Africa alone, precipitated a change in the place of value of empire in contemporary British culture. Events such as the Suez Crisis in 1956 exposed Britain's military and financial weakness, diminishing its position in the world as a global geopolitical force.<sup>33</sup> This shift was reflected in many aspects of material culture that had once promoted empire as a modernising force. The 1951 Festival of Empire, which staged an exhibition entitled 'A Focus on Colonial Progress,' was indicative of Britain's attempt to reimagine itself as a benevolent trustee of the Commonwealth leading emerging nations towards self-government to which all could aspire.<sup>34</sup> This process of reorientation was reflected in museums across Britain and in how they sought to redisplay and reinterpret their collections.<sup>35</sup>

There are many examples in which museums began to reframe their displays with the onset of decolonisation. Tipu's Tiger, taken by the British at the siege of Seringapatam in 1799 during the last Anglo-Mysore war, displayed in East India House in London from 1808, and subsequently displayed in the Imperial Institute in South Kensington from 1879, was displayed as a trophy of war against a supposedly aggressive eastern rule. In 1947, Tipu's Tiger was displayed in the South Kensington Museum before being moved to the Victoria and Albert Museums in 1956, recontextualised as a masterpiece of Indian art. Sadiya Qureshi argues that