



Ruling Minds: Psychology in the British Empire

By Erik Linstrum

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At its zenith in the early twentieth century, the British Empire ruled nearly one-quarter of the world's inhabitants. As they worked to exercise power in diverse and distant cultures, British authorities relied to a surprising degree on the science of mind. *Ruling Minds* explores how psychology opened up new possibilities for governing the empire. From the mental testing of workers and soldiers to the use of psychoanalysis in development plans and counterinsurgency strategy, psychology provided tools for measuring and managing the minds of imperial subjects. But it also led to unintended consequences.

Following researchers, missionaries, and officials to the far corners of the globe, Erik Linstrum examines how they used intelligence tests, laboratory studies, and even dream analysis to chart abilities and emotions. Psychology seemed to offer portable and standardized forms of knowledge that could be applied to people everywhere. Yet it also unsettled basic assumptions of imperial rule. Some experiments undercut the racial hierarchies that propped up British dominance. Others failed to realize the orderly transformation of colonized societies that experts promised and officials hoped for. Challenging our assumptions about scientific knowledge and empire, Linstrum shows that psychology did more to expose the limits of imperial authority than to strengthen it.

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Editorial Review

Review

Challenging one-dimensional accounts that stress the unapologetic complicity of psychologists in the project of empire, he excels in unpicking the complexity and contradictions that bedeviled the encounter between science and colonial rule...Linstrum's deeply researched volume also contains a warning as pertinent now as it was in the age of pith helmets?that whatever the intentions of the researcher, and however much they qualify their conclusions, officials are often willing to co-opt knowledge to their own ends. (Duncan Bell *Times Literary Supplement* 2016-05-13)

Ruling Minds takes the reader through the largely forgotten history of how Great Britain tried to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its empire through the new 'mind sciences,' a broad category that included personality and intelligence testing as well as the theories of Jung and Freud. From Uganda to India to Burma, government bureaucrats, academics, missionaries, and anthropologists used tests like Porteus's [maze] to try to research, rationalize, and control the empire. (Jack Meserve *New York Magazine* 2016-02-16)

This book offers a compelling examination of the intersections between psychology, empire, and modernity. Linstrum deftly illuminates the ways in which psychology was harnessed and deployed in the making and remaking of imperial modernities, and this analytical concern allows him to press against the often narrow focus on the production of cultural difference that has characterized most recent scholarship on the history of colonial knowledge and empire building. There is no doubt that this is a sophisticated and significant work. (Tony Ballantyne, author of *Entanglements of Empire*)

Linstrum's deft and fascinating study of imperial psychology reveals the ever-present tension between the radical possibilities of psychology and the requirements of the colonial state. In seeking to reconcile human diversity with a universalist model of the mind, psychologists ran up against the assumptions and prejudices that fed imperial rule, as well as the needs of colonial regimes. This is a groundbreaking work of considerable depth, that speaks as much to contemporary concerns as it does to the history of the British Empire. A tour de force. (Philippa Levine, author of *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset*)

A tough and sophisticated account of how the 'science of mind' was deployed in the British Empire in surprising ways?to shore up empire, to critique it, to modernize it. Linstrum's own psychological acumen is applied to the personnel, instruments, and subjects of imperial psychology to reveal the multiple potentials?but also, ultimately, the frailty?of expertise in the global power politics of the twentieth century. (Peter Mandler, author of *Return from the Natives*)

Linstrum has written a rich, captivating, and well-researched study of how British authorities used psychology as a global system of knowledge and practice informing, bolstering, and, conversely, undermining the political projects of British imperialism in the 20th century...This reviewer has difficulty imagining a future history of modernist psychology that will be the equal of Linstrum's impressive foundational study. An indispensable read for anyone interested in history, psychology, and political science?particularly their intersection. (M. Uebel *Choice* 2016-06-01)

Wide-ranging, evenhanded, and very well written...Linstrum's book marks a significant revision in our understanding of his subject. He carries this out with such sensitivity and aplomb that it sometimes takes a moment of reflection and a flick to the literature cited in his notes to reveal just how powerful and, possibly

controversial, an intervention he is making. (Freddy Foks *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 2016-07-01)

This is an excellent book: smart, elegantly written, well researched and ambitious in scope. (Mathew Thomson *British Journal of the History of Science* 2016-12-01)

Linstrum argues that rather than providing answers and resolution, psychology's enormous and ambiguous promise bought it a consistent place in the British colonial world, even as individuals and their research exposed unexpected conclusions and challenges to existing thinking. Across changing circumstances, this book highlights a consistent but contradictory discourse underlying the late British Empire.

(Catherine Coombs *Canadian Journal of History* 2016-12-01)

[Linstrum] has conducted a vast survey of primary and secondary source material to knit together this fascinating study. Perhaps the term page-turner should never be applied to a nonfiction monograph, but *Ruling Minds* comes close. It manages to both take in the macro view and offer good illustrations of specific events and key individuals... Good history is not just intended to answer questions, though. It is also about opening new avenues of inquiry, and *Ruling Minds* has undoubtedly done that. For this and the other points noted above, it is difficult not to be impressed with Linstrum's efforts. Decades from now, this book may very well be known as the grand, old required reading for any serious student of psychology and empire. (Roger Pauly *History* 2017-01-01)

About the Author

Erik Linstrum is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Virginia.

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