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Comparative portrayals of the British Empire in history textbooks, 1920s–2020s: influences, paradigms and historical frameworks

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Abstract

Debates over the content, aims and purpose of school history are salient features in educational landscapes across the world, and in recent years in the UK many such debates have focused on how the history of the British Empire should be taught in schools. With the aim of better understanding how British imperial histories are, and have been, approached in English classrooms, this study compares two samples of history textbooks, one of books published between 1920 and 1939, and the second of books published between 2015 and 2023. Additionally, the study explores changing traditions in English history education more generally, and in particular compares how histories of the British Empire have been narrated under the influence of two pedagogical traditions: the 'great

tradition', which dominated English history education for most of the twentieth century until the 1970s, and 'new history', which came to dominate from the early 1970s onwards, and which was particularly influenced by the establishment of the Schools Council History Project in 1972. A complex range of factors have influenced how histories relating to the British Empire have been narrated in textbooks over the years, but the study particularly considers the extent to which the founding principles of the Schools Council History Project continue to influence how histories are narrated half a century after the establishment of the project, and what implications this might have in the context of empire histories specifically. We also consider how such patterns may influence further developments in textbook portrayals of British imperial history in the future.

Keywords history education; history textbooks; British Empire; imperial histories; Schools History Project; new history

Introduction

Debates over the content, aims and purpose of school history have been a pervasive and long-standing feature in educational landscapes across the world (for example, Carretero et al., 2012; Elmersjö et al., 2017; Nakou and Barca, 2010; Symcox and Wilschut, 2009; Vickers and Jones, 2005). In recent years in the UK, such debates have often focused on how the history of the British Empire should be taught to young people. As many commentators have noted, these issues have also become central to the 'culture wars' currently raging in the UK and beyond (for example, Kennedy, 2018; Lester, 2022; Mitchell, 2021; Sanghera, 2021). Too often, however, these debates have been impoverished by an emphasis on what advocates insist *should* be taught, or what they assume *has* been taught, rather than on any understanding of what *is* or *was* taught in history classrooms.

As a window into understanding how young people have encountered narrative portrayals of the British Empire in history classrooms over time, this study analysed widely used textbooks from two periods, the first set published between 1920 and 1939, and the second published between 2015 and 2023, and still available from publishers at the time of writing (2024). The earlier period represents a time just after the height of the British Empire in 1919, meaning that authors in this period were writing about the Empire as a thriving institution that they could presume would endure into the future.

In the context of history education in England, this period was characterised by what is known as the 'great tradition', which continued to dominate for around two-thirds of the twentieth century (Dickinson, 2000; Phillips, 1998; Sylvester, 1994). This traditional model began to change during the 1970s, when what is known as 'new history' emerged as a result of the introduction of the Schools Council History Project (SCHP; now known as the Schools History Project), in 1972. This is not to be confused with 'new imperial history', which refers to a movement in historiography (see, for example, Howe, 2020). The SCHP led to a radical re-examination of the practices associated with the era of the great tradition, and the principles adopted by advocates of new history prompted radical changes in history curricula, examination specifications, pedagogy and textbooks (Cannadine et al., 2011; Dickinson, 2000; Foster, 2023; Haydn, 2004; Husbands et al., 2003; Retz, 2022; Woolley, 2020). John Slater described the SCHP as 'the most significant and beneficent influence on the learning of history … to emerge this century … It sums up what is often called "the new history"' (Slater, 1989). Although a wide range of actors have pushed back against some or all aspects of new history over the years (for a detailed history, see, for example, Van der Vlies, 2022), we found compelling evidence that, 50 years on, many of the principles of new history endure as an established paradigm in terms of the content of history textbooks. This has various implications in relation to how the British Empire is narrated to young people, which are discussed below.

Rationale and literature review

This focused textbook study is part of a large-scale collaborative project, 'A Portrait of the Teaching of the British Empire, Migration and Belonging in English Secondary Schools' (PortraitEMB, 2023). The

PortraitEMB project's overall aim is to provide a research-informed evidence base that will guide and inform teaching and learning about this complex and often contested history. This smaller study seeks to build on existing research conducted in the UK context, and to contribute to wider international textbook research relating to portrayals of empire and colonialism (for example, Araújo and Rodríguez Maeso, 2012; Cajani, 2013; Carretero et al., 2002; Cave, 2002; Crawford, 2013; Cruz, 2007; Holmén, 2011; Joshi, 2010; Kan and Vickers, 2002; Kim et al., 2013; Lantheaume, 2013; Oo, 2012; Van Nieuwenhuyse and Valentim, 2018).

Although it would be imprudent to claim that textbook content precisely mirrors what teachers teach and students learn, textbooks have played a significant role in history teaching and learning in classrooms across the country for more than a century (Marsden, 2001), and thus analysis of school history textbooks provides important insights into how young people are likely to have encountered narratives and portrayals of the British Empire over time. Furthermore, because textbooks are 'widely vetted' (Willinsky, 1998: 125) at various stages by, for example, authors, publishers and teachers, they are likely to reflect the attitudes of a range of educational thinkers (Willinsky, 1998). Analysis of history textbooks also illuminates the pedagogical and epistemological assumptions that inform teaching and learning in any given era (Grever and Van der Vlies, 2017).

A number of previous studies have focused on how the British Empire has been portrayed in school textbooks over time. For practical reasons, including access to out-of-print textbooks, a lack of availability of publishing and sales data indicating which titles were most widely used, and the time required for in-depth analysis of textually dense books, most of these earlier studies have compared small numbers of books covering limited time periods. Much of the existing research on this topic has examined how empire histories were narrated in schoolbooks before the First World War (for example, Castle, 1996; Chancellor, 1970; Yeandle, 2015). Other studies have looked at more recent textbooks only, such as Abadia and Collins (2018), and Grindel (2013), both of which explored history books aimed at Key Stage 3 students (typically aged 11–14), as we did, although in the case of Abadia and Collins, these were self-study guides rather than class textbooks. Grindel (2013) compared a textbook published before the 1988 National Curriculum with books published between 2006 and 2011, finding that significantly more attention was paid to histories of the British Empire and migration (Grindel, 2013) in the later books. Abadia and Collins (2018: 66, emphasis in the original) found that in the books they analysed there was 'a tendency to simplify rather than problematize by presenting colonial subject positions and imperial historical perspectives as binary opposite, such as *good* or *bad*, *right* or *wrong*', an observation which is relevant to our findings about balance sheet framings (see below). Few existing studies compare pre-Second World War textbooks with contemporary books, although one which does, and which provides key background to our research, is Van der Vlies (2022). That author conducted a study of four samples of textbooks from both England and the Netherlands, also beginning with books published after the First World War, and concluding with more recent books published between 1988 and 2010. Aside from this key area of overlap, her research is distinct from ours in that she did not focus on histories of European empires in general, but on narrative 'echoes' of one key historical event for each of her two national contexts.

The methodological approaches employed for this study were informed by key academic frameworks established by international researchers (for example, Carrier, 2018; Foster, 2011; Fuchs, 2011; Klerides, 2010; Morgan and Henning, 2013; Müller, 2018; Pingel, 2010; Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon, 2010; Sleeter and Grant, 1991; Vera and Fuchs, 2018). They were also based on aspects of previous research conducted by the authors (for example, Foster, 1999, 2005; Foster and Burgess, 2013; Foster and Crawford, 2006; Foster and Karayianni, 2018; McDermid, 2020). Like many other textbook studies (Bock, 2018), our research used discourse analysis methods, as 'Textbook knowledge … must be decoded (analysed) in terms of its semantic structure, function and form in order to be defined in terms of sociocultural knowledge' (Fuchs, 2011, cited in Bock, 2018: 61). Like Abadia and Collins (2018) in their analysis of study guides, and also using insights from Klerides (2010), we looked particularly at who is given and denied agency in narrations of empire histories, whose perspectives are centred, and whose are marginalised: 'Who is active and with whom do they interact, who is passive, who is visible and who is not?' (Fuchs and Henne, 2018: 29). We also considered the role of the author in presenting authoritative versions of 'the facts', and which other voices are present.

Textbook samples

The study analyses two sets of history textbooks published during the periods 1920–39 and 2015–23, respectively. We refer to the textbooks in the first set as 'traditional textbooks', as in Klerides (2010: 41), and to the second as 'contemporary textbooks'. We chose the first of these two periods as it covers the final years of the British Empire's existence as a thriving and dominant institution. This was also a period, following the First World War, when there was already widespread international debate about how history should be narrated in school textbooks, as the war had 'led contemporary politicians and intellectuals, especially in Europe, to reflect on education's role in the promotion of conflict' (Roldán Vera, 2018: 105; see also Van der Vlies, 2022).

Around the time of the emergence of new history in the 1970s, histories of the British Empire were not extensively taught in English classrooms. Stanard (2018: 17) notes that the post-war period 'witnessed a decentering of historical research away from empire, strictly speaking, toward study of the nations and peoples of the now formerly colonised world'; following the period of decolonisation after the Second World War, historical understandings of imperialism had to be reappraised, and, as Van der Vlies (2022) notes, history textbooks typically take some time to catch up with new developments in history and historiography, including 'the transformation undergone by the historiography of the British Empire since the 1980s' (Grindel, 2013: 34; see also, for example, Howe, 2020). For these reasons, and also because the current period represents a time of increasing interest in how empire histories are taught, our second sample includes books that are in print and available from publishers at the time of writing (2024). The second period is shorter than the first because most textbooks currently available from publishers were produced after the most recent changes to the National Curriculum for history in 2014. In contrast, there were no extensive changes to English school curricula between 1919 and 1939, meaning that there were no periods of sudden, widespread change in the textbooks published during this period. In fact, as various authors have noted, many popular titles were repeatedly reprinted over several decades (for example, MacKenzie, 1984), with books published in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s still in use in London schools in the 1960s (Hatch, 1962).

The traditional textbooks were selected from the Historical Textbooks Collection at the UCL Institute of Education (UCL Special Collections), which holds approximately 88,000 textbooks published from the 1890s onwards, representing all aspects of the curriculum and all age ranges. To identify a credible textbook sample for close analysis, four selection criteria were established:

1. that they were written for the history classroom
2. that they were broadly aimed at students in secondary education (aged about 11–16)
3. that they had a significant content focus on the British Empire
4. that we could find evidence of widespread classroom use.

For the fourth criterion, as publication data and sales figures are not widely available for textbooks from this period, the WorldCat online library catalogue was used to determine which textbooks were popular based on the number of editions or reprints that were produced. Using these four criteria, an initial sample of 40 textbooks was identified, and this was further narrowed down based on relevant content to the 11 textbooks listed in Appendix A.

Selecting a sample of contemporary textbooks was more straightforward, as the contemporary textbook publishing landscape in England is dominated by only four major publishers. We wanted to analyse books that are currently used in English classrooms, so we identified one book each from the core Key Stage 3 history textbook series published by, and currently available from, the four largest educational publishers: Collins, Hodder, Oxford University Press and Pearson. We analysed the books aimed at Year 8 students, as, in most cases, these cover periods from either the sixteenth or eighteenth centuries until around 1900, and include more topics related to British imperialism than either the Year 7 or Year 9 books from the same series. One disadvantage is that not all these Year 8 books cover the origins of the British Empire, and none of them cover the post-1945 decolonisation period, although these periods are covered in the remaining two books in our sample, one of which covers more material as it used for a full three-year Key Stage 3 course (Textbook N, 2019), and one of which focuses specifically on British imperialism (Textbook Q, 2023). The contemporary textbooks referred to are listed in Appendix B.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following three central research questions.

- How were histories of the British Empire portrayed in textbooks in the era of the 'great tradition' compared to how they are narrated in contemporary books?
- To what extent do current portrayals reflect the ongoing influence of 'new history', and to what extent do more traditional patterns endure?
- In relation to textbook portrayals of the British Empire, what are some issues that arise in relation to dominant approaches, and how might trends in textbook portrayals of the British Empire change and develop in the future?

Analytical approach

To address these questions, the research progressed through several stages. First, a detailed literature review was undertaken focused on changing approaches to history education since 1919. Particular attention was paid to understanding the educational landscape prior to the 1970s, when the so-called 'great tradition' was dominant, and to the emergence of 'new history', and the impact of the Schools Council History Project in particular, from the early 1970s onwards. Core characteristics of these two traditions were identified through a rigorous analysis of key primary and secondary literature and curriculum documentation. Samples of textbooks from each era were then selected for analysis. Initially the two authors collaboratively identified key sections and chapters in the samples which explicitly focused on the British Empire. Each author then independently read the agreed sections/chapters from each book, making observational notes on multiple-page data-collection sheets. In the fourth phase, the authors agreed a common qualitative analytical framework focusing on: (1) content (for example, what topics, individuals and events were deemed important? How were historical topics classified and arranged?); (2) perspectives (for example, who were the key agents and protagonists in the master narrative? What viewpoints were marginalised or excluded?); (3) pedagogy (for example, what pedagogical assumptions dominated? What were students being asked to do, and why?); and (4) epistemology (for example, how was the nature of history and the historical past presented? Was the past presented as a singular narrative, or were different interpretations of the past portrayed?).

The results of this comparative analysis revealed a series of dominant themes and concepts which were used to address the research questions identified above. The discussion focuses on four key thematic areas of comparison, which were found to be notable not only in terms of changing portrayals of British Empire histories, but also interesting in terms of the pedagogical assumptions underlying these portrayals: (1) history as a body of knowledge versus history as a form of knowledge; (2) the use of historical sources; (3) historical interpretation and balance sheet approaches; and (4) Anglocentric narratives, forging a positive national identity. Reflections on the results of this detailed comparative analysis also provided a basis to explore the final research question, which focuses on core issues, and on potential future developments based on an analysis of the perspectives and content coverage of the most recent textbook in our sample.

History education in the era of the 'great tradition'

Although some exceptions existed (see for example, Aldrich, 1984; Aldrich and Dean, 1991; Edwards, 2017), for around two-thirds of the twentieth century, history education in England was broadly dominated by what Slater (1989) terms the 'inherited consensus' of the 'great tradition', which was characterised by a number of distinctive features (Crawford, 1996; Dickinson, 2000; Foster, 2023; Haydn, 2004; Husbands et al., 2003; Phillips, 1998; Sylvester, 1994). First, almost without exception, school history syllabuses focused on a chronological parade through British (or, more specifically, English) history from the Roman invasion of 43 CE onwards. Beyond a focus on Britain's empire, limited attention was accorded to European or world events. Following the devastation of first one and then a second world war, emphasis was placed on providing a celebratory narrative of Britain's past, with the history classroom and textbook narratives aiming to engender patriotism, civic pride and a sense of belonging to a powerful national (or imperial) 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2016). Of particular importance in the context

of our research, celebrating the achievements of the British Empire at a time when it ruled over 450 million people and its territorial possessions covered one-quarter of the world's surface was a staple of the history curriculum.

A key feature of history education in this era was the dominance of an uncontested canon of key events in British history. Typically, instruction focused on constitutional, military and political events, with scant coverage of social, cultural or economic developments. The fusion of patriotic history education with the aims of moral and civic education (Haydn, 2004; Yeandle, 2015) often resulted in teachers encouraging young people to honour and imitate the attributes of national 'heroes' such as Wilberforce, Rhodes, Livingstone or Clive. School history tended to frame history according to 'the Whig interpretation of a largely progressive development of democracy, welfare and improvement' (Husbands et al., 2003: 8), and neither history classrooms nor history textbooks were regarded as sites to consider critical or alternative interpretations of past events, or the perspectives of, for example, other nations, colonised peoples, working people or women.

Another key characteristic of history education during this era related to issues of pedagogy and epistemology. Generally, the teacher dominated instruction in history, and their role was to 'deliver' the content of a core 'body' of factual knowledge (often via lecture, blackboard notations or reading from textbooks). History was generally regarded as a 'received subject', demanding little or no active engagement from students (Cannadine et al., 2011; Sylvester, 1994), who were commonly expected to memorise core information, often catalogued in history textbooks, and then to reproduce this knowledge in the form of tests or essays. Often, therefore, dull and limited pedagogical approaches were supported by textbooks which presented history as a continuous narrative of facts, sometimes interspersed with lists of questions testing readers' recall and understanding (Cannadine et al., 2011; Haydn, 2004; Marsden, 2001), and sometimes with no activities for students at all. The idea of young people being encouraged to consider the nature of history, or to acquire any epistemological sense of how historical narratives were constructed, would have been alien to students and teachers in the era of the great tradition.

'New history' and the Schools Council History Project (SCHP)

This great tradition remained dominant for several decades after the Second World War (for example, Aldrich and Dean, 1991; Booth, 1969; Dickinson, 2000; Husbands et al., 2003; MacKenzie, 1984; Phillips, 1998; Sylvester, 1994), despite significant societal and educational change in post-war Britain, including, and of particular relevance to our research, the decline of the British Empire. Eventually, however, the development of what became known as 'new history' during the 1970s and 1980s emerged to challenge these established conventions. The changes were not immediate or cataclysmic, but over time they marked a significant paradigm shift in English history education.

One important catalyst for change was a widespread concern that history's place in the curriculum was facing existential threat, as encapsulated by Mary Price's (1968: 344) famous warning that 'in a great many schools it is excruciatingly, dangerously, dull, and what is more of little apparent relevance'. This stark warning came during a period of profound change in English education (Aldrich, 2002), key aspects of which included the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in 1973 and the rapid rise of comprehensive schools, which made up fewer than 10 per cent of English secondary schools in 1964, but 80 per cent by 1980 (Cannadine et al., 2011). In this context, many history teachers sought a reappraisal of the subject to ensure that it was more relevant, accessible and appealing to students of all abilities.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, therefore, educators urged a radical rethink of the subject's nature, purpose and practice. Much of the curriculum innovation that challenged core assumptions in English schools from the 1960s onwards was driven by the Schools Council, established in 1963, and, in the realm of history education, the Schools Council History Project (SCHP) was a key element of a widespread reappraisal of the ideas of the great tradition. The SCHP, which was to have a profound and lasting impact on the subject (Cannadine et al., 2011; Woolley, 2020), was originally developed between 1972 and 1976 under the direction of David Sylvester at the University of Leeds. The project was primarily motivated by a desire to make history more relevant, interesting and meaningful to young people, as articulated in its inaugural document, *A New Look at History* (Schools History Project, 1976). In a radical departure from past perspectives, *A New Look at History* outlined core purposes for the study of history in school, all of which remain central to the current iteration of the SCHP, the Schools History Project (Schools History Project, 2024). According to some of the key principles, historical study should help

young people understand the contemporary world, consider their own identities in relation to people from different times and places, understand processes of change and continuity, and think critically about human affairs (Schools History Project, 1976).

Influenced by the work of Bruner (1960) and Hirst (1974), advocates for change focused on history's disciplinary qualities, and argued that young people should be taught to view history not as a 'body of knowledge' to be memorised, but as a 'form of knowledge' to be explored, understood and actively critiqued (Wineburg, 2001). Thus, a distinctive feature of new history was its radical and innovative focus on the epistemological and pedagogical development of the subject. The long-standing belief that students should only learn a fixed canon of key events and individuals in British history was abandoned by many teachers, and increasingly history classrooms became spaces where teachers and students considered and debated different interpretations of past events. The architects of new history also broke new educational ground by advocating that students engage in historical enquiries supported by an intelligent appreciation of historical evidence. Thus, teachers who endorsed the principles of new history invited students to critically consider a range of primary and secondary sources, such as photographs, newspaper extracts, maps, political cartoons, documents and historical accounts, using them to develop arguments and reach conclusions. By the 1990s, the idea of structuring units of work around a series of dominant enquiry questions had become increasingly popular in classrooms, and it was a notable feature of many history textbooks (see, for example, Shepard et al., 1993).

Along with the profound educational changes that took place in England during the 1960s and 1970s, it is important to consider the emergence of new history within the rapidly changing sociocultural context of the time. Phillips (1998: 14), referring to increasing immigration to Britain after the Second World War, argued that 'increasing cultural diversity caused urban schools to re-evaluate the orientation of their history syllabuses'. Certainly, significant change was afoot in the history profession, with the focus increasingly moving away from political history and towards more social, inclusive and critical histories (Aldrich and Dean, 1991; Cannadine et al., 2011; Dickinson, 2000; Husbands et al., 2003; Retz, 2022). These key developments undoubtedly also had an impact on the knowledge and conceptual orientation of history teachers entering the profession during this period (Retz, 2022).

The SCHP became increasingly popular with teachers, as growing numbers embraced the central tenets of new history, and it has continued to have a profound impact on history education (Cannadine et al., 2011; Haydn, 2004; Husbands et al., 2003; Retz, 2022; Woolley, 2020). New history significantly influenced the development of the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) history examination specifications from 1986 onwards, as well as England's inaugural National Curriculum for history in 1991, although this was not without controversy (see below). All subsequent versions of the National Curriculum (for example, DfE, 1995, 2013; DfEE, 1999; DfES, 1991; QCA, 2007) have also stated that as well as learning core content, it is important for students to acquire key disciplinary understandings.

By the mid-1980s, it was evident that core aspects of new history had become mainstream in schools in England, although it would be misleading to suggest that vast swathes of teachers across the country totally eschewed 'traditional' history education and comprehensively embraced all aspects of the new model. Most typically, history teachers would draw on both traditions, holding the two in 'creative tension' (Haydn, 2004; Husbands et al., 2003; Woolley, 2020). There were also those who pointedly rejected the principles of new history (for a more detailed discussion, see, for example, Van der Vlies, 2022). Disputes between advocates of traditional and new history became particularly fierce at the end of the 1980s, with controversy accompanying the introduction of the first National Curriculum (Crawford, 1996; Foster, 1998; Phillips, 1998; Woolley, 2020). Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had previously been Education Secretary between 1970 and 1974, was particularly eager to exert control over the teaching of history. She made her 'traditionalist' position abundantly clear in a direct attack on 'progressive' new history, famously declaring herself 'appalled' by suggestions that history education should 'put the emphasis on interpretation and enquiry as against content and knowledge' (Thatcher, 1993: 596). She also demanded that more attention be paid to British history and chronological study (Thatcher, 1993). Ultimately, as many commentators have argued (Haydn, 2004; Husbands et al., 2003; Woolley, 2020), the first National Curriculum in history was a compromise between the two traditions. On the one hand, traditionalists were appeased by its central chronological focus on British history, while, on the other hand, new history advocates celebrated the central requirement that students be taught to understand and evaluate historical evidence, and to consider differing interpretations and diverse perspectives.

While Thatcherite conservatism dominated the sociopolitical landscape in England between 1979 and 1997, 13 years of New Labour rule between 1997 and 2010 gave somewhat more space to more progressive and outward-looking voices. For example, heavily influenced by the Ajegbo Report (DfES, 2007), the 2007 revised National Curriculum for history introduced a new requirement to focus on 'cultural, ethnic and religious diversity', and to pay 'more attention to topics such as the impact through time of the movement and settlement of diverse peoples to, from, and within the British Isles' (DfES, 2007: 3). The beginning of the twenty-first century was also marked by increased attention to issues of citizenship, human rights, cultural identities, postcolonialism and the legacy of Empire, and a re-assessment of Britain's place in the modern world (for example, Stanard, 2018).

After 2010, during another 14 consecutive years of Conservative rule (2010–24), the educational agenda once again became more influenced by reactionary and traditional elements, although in 2013, the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, was unable to fully introduce planned reforms to the history curriculum that he had hoped would focus more narrowly on British achievements and foster a sense of 'national pride' (Yeandle, 2015: 5; see also Grindel, 2013), following widespread resistance from history teachers and academics (Evans, 2013). More recently, radical social movements such as Black Lives Matter have contributed to widespread public awareness, interest and debate over how histories of British colonialism in particular should be approached both within and outside school classrooms, and this, along with key developments in postcolonial historiography (see, for example, Howe, 2020), has also been significant in mitigating the power of more conservative voices.

Textbook analysis and discussion

These changing traditions, along with the wider societal factors, are reflected in various ways in the textbooks that have been produced for use in schools, and their influence on how histories of the British Empire have been narrated to children raise some particularly interesting and important issues. We first discuss the most general features of our two sets of textbooks, which relate to epistemology and pedagogy, including how students are asked to use sources and interpretations, before considering some of the more specific features associated with changing pedagogical traditions, and the potential significance of these in terms of how histories of the British Empire have been presented to students.

History as a body of knowledge versus history as a form of knowledge

One area where there are clear differences between the two sets of textbooks analysed (with one exception from the contemporary sample, see below) centres on what textbook authors tell their readers about how they should understand the nature of history as a subject, and what studying it should involve. In almost all the traditional textbooks in our sample, produced when the great tradition was dominant, history is narrated as a series of facts which students are expected to learn and memorise, and this is generally as true for the textbooks published towards the end of this 19-year period, in the late 1930s, as for those published closer to the beginning, in the early 1920s. In many cases, students are tested at the end of each chapter, or of the book, with a series of questions on this factual knowledge, such as 'Make lists of the British possessions in each of the continents' (Textbook H, 1933: 23), or: 'Where is India?'; 'What are Hindus?'; 'What title did parliament give the queen twenty years after the Mutiny?' (Textbook K, 1939: 56). Other books, such as Textbook F, which is part of a series designed 'for silent reading' (Textbook F, 1932: 4) do not include exercises at all. Some authors ask students to write essays, but these typically require them to defend a position specified by the author, rather than to develop their own opinions, as is more typical in current textbooks: Textbook G (1933: 288) asks students to 'Show that the nineteenth century was a period of social progress'; Textbook K (1939: 18) asks students to explain why 'William Wilberforce and the Earl of Shaftesbury were not only philanthropists, but successful philanthropists'; and Textbook E (1927: 308–10) asks students to discuss 'The eighteenth century as an age of great men.' Some books also include speaking tasks, although, as with the essays, these generally ask individual students to prepare a speech on a specified topic, rather than talking about their own opinions or discussing anything with classmates. Textbook H (1933: 131), for example, asks students to 'Prepare a discussion on the advantages of colonies to the mother country', and to 'Prepare speeches in favour of the abolition of slavery.'

In contrast, most of the contemporary textbooks in our sample (Textbook M, 2018; Textbook N, 2019; Textbook O, 2020) include detailed introductory sections explaining how activities in the books will help students develop their 'history skills' (Textbook O, 2020: 4) or skills in 'writing historically' (Textbook M, 2018: 5), evidence of a belief that history should be considered as a form rather than a body of knowledge. All the contemporary books, with the exception of Textbook P (2022) – which is an interesting outlier in our sample, in that it appears to pointedly reject many of the principles of new history – ask students to critically consider a range of sources and interpretations, and to use these to develop their own opinions and arguments. Enquiry questions are present in all the contemporary books, in many cases as overarching themes or subthemes for whole units or chapters (Textbook L, 2015; Textbook M, 2018; Textbook O, 2020; Textbook Q, 2023), indicating that enquiry questions as an idea are accepted as standard. Even Textbook P includes questions that are at least referred to as 'enquiry questions' in each unit, although in this case the questions, such as 'What motivated Britain to gain a global empire during the 18th century?' (Textbook P, 2022: 19), are included at the end of each unit without any context or information in terms of what students are supposed to do with them, so they seem to be written to consolidate students' knowledge after they learn it, rather than to structure learning throughout a unit of study, as established in the context of new history.

Another important element of approaching history as a form rather than as a body of knowledge involves focusing on key concepts that emphasise relationships and connections, such as chronology, causation, significance, continuity and change. While traditional textbooks often include timelines listing the dates of events, such as battles or the establishment of new laws (Textbook A, 1920; Textbook B, 1921; Textbook E, 1927; Textbook F, 1932; Textbook J, 1934), these are typically included as reference lists at the beginning or end of books, rather than in the main text, and students are not asked to focus in any depth on connections between events. Most contemporary authors, however, do draw students' attention to such relationships, considering chronology in relation to causation, significance, continuity and change. For example, Textbook Q (2023: 26) includes a detailed timeline of British colonial violence, while Textbook L (2015: 21) includes a timeline of 'important dates in Britain's slave trade', so that readers can observe how abolitionist pressures grew over a number of years. A focus on causation, continuity and change is also demonstrated in enquiries such as 'Did emancipation make colonial subjects free?' (Textbook Q, 2023: 32), which discusses how enslavement was replaced by a range of other systems that attempted to maintain control over formerly enslaved people in many colonised parts of the Caribbean (Textbook Q, 2023: 32–5). At the end of the section, students are again asked to draw their own conclusions from the evidence: 'How convincing do you find the view that colonial subjects in the Caribbean became "free" in 1834?' (Textbook Q, 2023: 35).

Contemporary textbooks also ask students to consider the significance of particular issues, either individually or in relation to others. At the end of a timeline section on violence, Textbook Q asks readers to consider the extremely broad question, 'How significant was colonial violence?' (Textbook Q, 2023: 29). The abolition of slavery is a key focus for contemporary authors in this context; two textbooks (Textbook M, 2018; Textbook O, 2020: 180–3) present students with a range of contributing factors and ask them to decide which were the most important. Textbook O includes a specific assessment task on this topic, including two pages of guidance on considering causation in historical writing (Textbook O, 2020: 186–7). Textbook M (2018) focuses on chronology as well as causation, presenting a detailed four-page section considering how various abolitionist groups influenced each other over time, eventually developing into a powerful and successful movement. Traditional textbook authors, on the other hand, more often state what they consider to have been key factors influencing particular outcomes, rather than asking students to compare different causes and assess their relative importance. In practice, this often means that British imperial authorities, or related groups such as missionaries, are singled out as solely responsible for particular outcomes, often erasing the agency of Indigenous peoples in the process. Textbook F (1932: 10), for example, referring to missionaries in parts of the Pacific, writes that 'owing largely to the work of these men, most of the people of the islands have given up their cannibalism and warlike habits'. Here, as the focus is on the 'achievements' of missionaries and 'cannibalism and warlike habits' are only mentioned in passing, students are given no space to consider on what the author might have based this comment, or the extent to which it may be false or misleading.

Contemporary approaches often reflect a questionable assumption that it is useful, or even possible, to rank contributing factors to any given outcome in order of importance. Nevertheless, in most cases (Textbook P is the exception), they do provide at least some opportunities for students to consider

historical evidence critically, suggesting that this aspect of new history is still regarded as important by textbook authors.

Use of historical sources

The way historical sources are included in textbooks also reflects the divide discussed above between conceptualising history as a body or as a form of knowledge. While all but one of the textbooks in our contemporary sample regularly include a range of historical sources for students to compare and evaluate critically, this is not the case with the traditional textbooks. Although several do include historical documents and/or images, these are typically presented as illustrations or additional information supporting the author's main narrative, with any tasks related to the sources involving comprehension, testing students' recall of related information, or wider reading on the same topic. Textbook I (1934: 379–80), for example, includes an extract from Pitt's India Act, with tasks related to comprehension, followed by questions including: 'From what Act is this reading taken? When was it passed?'; 'Make a numbered list summarising the terms of the Act as given in this reading'; 'Explain exactly what changes this Act made in the government of India' (Textbook I, 1934: 380). Additional essay questions again ask students to discuss conclusions already determined by the author: 'Why was India a suitable field for European trade and colonisation in the eighteenth century?; 'Account for the British success and the French failure in India' (Textbook I, 1934: 381).

Textbook G (1933: preface) makes a point of including illustrations based on 'contemporary sources, so as to preserve the spirit of the period as far as possible'; the author regards this as innovative, as 'Many of them have never before appeared in school books' (Textbook G, 1933: preface), but students are not asked any questions about them. Textbook A (1920), which is aimed at readers at the younger end of our age range, regularly includes quotations from contemporary accounts of the events discussed, although without always noting who produced them. Where this information is included, the producers virtually always turn out to be White English men. In one interesting example, the author includes an extract from Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* (1799), which presents a sympathetic account of the local people Park encountered, while other sources included in this book give some clues as to the type of accounts from which some of the widespread disparaging ideas about various groups reproduced in many early twentieth-century textbooks and later are likely to have originated. These include a description of Aboriginal people in Australia written by Englishman William Dampier:

> [Dampier's 1699] tales of the natives were especially deterrent to future settlers. 'The inhabitants of this country,' he says, 'are the miserablest people in the world, and setting aside their human shape they differ little from brutes. Nothing could be got out of them but "threats and great noise."' A young sailor, who tried to catch one of them, was very nearly killed. (Textbook A, 1920: 102)

This last comment is the author's, apparently condemning those who resisted this attempted kidnap, rather than the sailor who attempted to kidnap them.

Meanwhile, almost all the contemporary textbooks (again, the exception is Textbook P), make a central point of asking students to critically consider a range of historical sources, and provide guidance about how historical sources can be used to reveal evidence about past events. However, one similarity with the older books is that most of the sources included were still originally produced by White European men. This is probably at least partly due to the fact that such sources are likely to be much easier for English authors to find (and obtain permission to publish) than, for example, texts produced by enslaved or formerly enslaved people. This is an issue related to the reality that the voices and artefacts of White European elites from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries are the most likely to be preserved in archives in the Global North; as Hartman (2008: 3) notes, 'There is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the middle passage.' For example, a section on transatlantic slavery in Textbook M (2018: 96–113) includes just over 20 sources that seem to have been produced by British or European men (where named, all seem to be male), including European colonists in what became the USA. In contrast, only four sources are attributed to Africans and/or formerly enslaved people: two extracts from Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative or the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, one text by Moroccan travel writer Leo Africanus (1526), and an announcement made by Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti (1793).

Many authors seem to be aware that this imbalance is an issue, and they attempt to address it in various ways. For example, although Textbook M (2018: 112) asks students to compare two descriptions

of the Middle Passage written by former European slave ship captains with only one by someone who experienced it as a captive (Equiano), the authors do make a specific point of asking readers to compare what the different sources can tell us about the feelings of the enslaved people on the ships. Thus, students are primarily encouraged to empathise with, and to consider the perspectives of, enslaved people in their readings of all three sources. Meanwhile, Textbook L (2015) addresses the problem by including multiple extracts from the same source, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, as a basis for introducing subtopics including precolonial West Africa, the Middle Passage, enslavement in Virginia and the Caribbean, and abolition. Textbook N (2019) makes a point of stating who produced sources and why, if this information is available, thus drawing attention to whose perspectives might be missing: 'This image was made for a plantation owner' (Textbook N, 2019: 132); 'An advertising poster from the Australian National Travel Association, 1930. The poster shows the landing of James Cook at Botany Bay' (Textbook N, 2019: 161). Questions then ask students to consider the significance of such contextual details: 'What impression does [the image] give you of working conditions on the plantations?' (Textbook N, 2019: 132); 'Why do you think the artist chose not to include Aborigines in the picture?' (Textbook N, 2019: 161). Textbook M (2018) includes a detailed section providing guidance on how to use sources to 'write historically'; this focuses on 'identifying what the source suggests and how it does this'; 'Considering purpose'; 'Considering context'; and finally writing a conclusion discussing a historical source incorporating all these elements (Textbook M, 2018: 129). The most recent textbook in our sample, Textbook Q (2023), makes the clearest attempt to include sources produced by Indigenous people in colonised places, and also includes sources drawing students' attention to points that are not discussed in most other books, and which challenge widespread misconceptions, for example, a painting by Italian painter Agostino Brunias (undated), showing diversity in the Caribbean: 'Brunias's work shows us that the Caribbean was not neatly divided into Black and white, enslaved and free, or rich and poor' (Textbook Q, 2023: 15). This may reflect the much more diverse authorship of this book compared to other books in our sample – it is unsurprising that a larger group of authors, with a wider range of perspectives and expertise, might have a wider range of ideas, and access to a wider range of sources compared to a single author or a smaller team. As this is the most recent book in the sample, it is also likely to reflect the influence of issues that are increasingly a focus in academic historiography relating to 'silences in the archive' and the need to find ways to include previously marginalised voices (for example, Moss and Thomas, 2021).

Overall, the significant differences between the traditional textbooks and all but one of the contemporary books in terms of these 'historical thinking' skills suggests that this principle of new history is still regarded as important by a majority of history textbook authors today. Nevertheless, in contexts where students are asked to consider a range of sources, it is clear that in textbooks currently in print, there is still an issue in terms of whose voices are presented and whose are silenced. Although the original SCHP emphasised the need for 'diversity' (Schools History Project, 2024) in history education, in practice, textbook authors have not necessarily been in a position to translate this into the inclusion of more marginalised voices in the sources they present. It is therefore encouraging that the most recent textbook in our sample indicates that authors and publishers are aware of this issue and are finding ways to address it.

Historical interpretations and balance sheet approaches

According to the SHP principles, students should have the opportunity not only to critically evaluate a range of historical sources, but also to engage with a range of interpretations (Schools History Project, 2024). All the contemporary textbooks in our sample except Textbook P (2022) – which is more similar to the traditional textbooks in that it is presented throughout as a straightforward 'factual' narrative – make a point of presenting students with contrasting interpretations of particular topics, and asking them to consider why different historians may have different views. In the context of the British Empire, perhaps because it is relatively difficult to find contemporary historians with unequivocally positive views on British imperialism (Riley, 2018), two of the contemporary textbooks, Textbooks O (2020: 215) and L (2015: 89), include extracts from Niall Ferguson's 2003 article 'Why we ruled the world'. Textbook O draws students' attention to Ferguson's background and opinions in a section focusing on the positionality of those who produced particular interpretations, what their various motivations might have been, and why they might be so different (Textbook O, 2020: 215), which is important guidance in terms of critical evaluation of historical interpretations. Textbook L (2015: 89) simply presents Ferguson's account along

with a contrasting one written by Richard Gott, another English historian, and asks students to rank their views on a spectrum according to how pro- or anti-Empire they are. Although the following pages do give students the chance to consider why historians may produce different interpretations, no background information is given about either Ferguson or Gott to help students understand why their interpretations are so different; the authors simply ask readers to consider whether they 'looked at the same kind of evidence about the same kind of people' (Textbook L, 2015: 91), which rather gives the impression that both interpretations represent attempts to present complete and objective versions of 'the truth' rather than supporting the authors' individual arguments.

Traditional textbook authors, who were often professional historians themselves, rarely include the interpretations of other historians. In fact, as traditional textbooks are typically based around a single, apparently authoritative, narrative, we can regard these textbooks themselves as historical interpretations similar to the type included in many contemporary books as material for comparison and critical evaluation (just as contemporary textbooks may be used as historical sources in the future). Indeed, one contemporary textbook (Textbook M, 2018: 150) includes an extract from a celebratory 1920s children's book on the British Empire, *The Wonder Book of Empire*, as an interpretation. This book explains to children why they should be proud to be imperial subjects. For example, 'In India, the British have welded scattered people into one, and filled them with such devotion that large numbers have gladly laid down their lives for the Empire' (Textbook M, 2018: 150). Most of the traditional books in our sample include just such lists of the many benefits that the British Empire apparently brought to different parts of the colonised world, or even to the world in general. Typically, traditional textbooks provide some variation on the following.

> Irrigation has made the desert blossom like a rose; improvements in transport have enabled goods to be moved from the remotest parts of the earth; agricultural research has developed useful plants suited to the particular climatic conditions of particular localities; scientific investigators … have devoted themselves to the elimination of disease. (Textbook H, 1933: 18)

And:

> The British in India have developed what is, in some respects, the most efficient, and … one of the least corrupt administrations in the world. They have secured internal peace, and fought, as far as human agency is able to fight, against the twin horrors of India, the plague and the famine. They have built railways and canals. They have organized a most efficient medical service, and they have encouraged education. (Textbook D, 1924: 697)

Meanwhile, although none of the contemporary textbooks present such universally positive narratives to students as 'the truth', in almost all cases they nevertheless reproduce broadly similar ideas as one side of what is usually referred to as a 'balance sheet' framing of British imperial history, where students are asked to consider the idea that British imperialism had both positive and negative impacts. All the contemporary textbooks apart from Textbook Q (2023) include some version of this balance sheet framing, and almost all focus this exclusively on India. The exception is Textbook L's (2015: 72–91) 20-page unit focused on the enquiry, 'Should the British Empire be a source of national pride?', which includes a list of 'benefits' covering not only India, but also Canada, South Africa, Hong Kong, Ceylon/Sri Lanka, Australia and New Zealand (Textbook L, 2015: 82–3). This is the only contemporary textbook where 'positives' are presented on their own page, without any 'negatives' to provide apparent balance, although later in this long unit there is some discussion of negative impacts (Textbook L, 2015: 85–7, 90–1). Textbook N (2019: 178–83) focuses an enquiry-based section on the perspectives of the British, framed by the question 'What mattered to the British rulers of India?'; the final task for students asks the rather leading question: '"What mattered most to the British in India was improving the lives of the Indian people". How far do you agree?' (Textbook N, 2019: 183). Textbook M (2018: 144–7) includes a four-page section focusing on the enquiry 'Who benefited from the British Empire?' Textbook O's (2020: 211) two-page section asks students to 'Make two lists, one of all the positive things that British rule brought to India, and one of all the negative things about British rule'. Significantly, the author adds: 'For each positive and negative thing, write where you got your information from' (Textbook O, 2020: 11). Students are then asked to discuss the statement 'It is not clear cut whether British rule in India was a good thing or a bad thing', and also to consider 'What issues do you face when thinking about whether you agree or disagree with this statement?' (Textbook O, 2020: 11).

Although these approaches clearly represent attempts to present a range of perspectives, which is one of the core tenets of new history, there are a number of important reasons why such framings tend to be problematic. One of the most basic is that a perceived need to present a 'balanced' range of interpretations may misleadingly give students the impression that this is a simple binary issue ('the Empire was good' versus 'the Empire was bad'), that there are an approximately equal number of valid and convincing arguments on both sides, and that a roughly equal number of historians hold each view. In a section entitled 'Why historians argue', Textbook L attempts to draw students' attention to diversity in terms of the experiences of people who lived under British imperial rule by asking students to consider a range of fictionalised comments on British imperialism voiced by different 'imperial characters'. Superficially, this does seem to imply that this history involved a 'balanced' range of positive and negative impacts, so that students can regard the overall impact of the British Empire to have been just as beneficial as it was harmful; indeed, the idea of 'balance' itself in this context is based on an underlying premise that the ultimate, correctly 'balanced' truth would be that British imperialism was morally neutral overall. Notably, in this case, the apparent 'benefits' are limited to the subjective opinions of an Indian child in 1900 stating that he enjoys school, a Victorian missionary claiming that the British eliminated 'many cruel and barbaric customs', and a Canadian settler celebrating the resources produced and exported in Canada. Meanwhile, the negative effects reflect objective realities of extreme violence and genocide, including the destruction of the Zulu Kingdom, the Kingdom of Benin and the traditional way of life of First Nations people in Australia (Textbook L, 2015: 90–1), and the problematic implication seems to be that these positions somehow 'balance' each other out into some form of moral neutrality.

Encouragingly, this issue is raised by the authors of the most recent textbook in our sample, Textbook Q (2023), indicating that authors writing now are well aware of the problems with this type of framing (see also, for example, Satia, 2020: 277, 2022):

> One of the biggest debates is about the legacy of Empire where people list the positives and negatives. This is often referred to as a 'balance sheet approach'. Critics argue this is limited, as some of the negative aspects, like violence, can never be properly compared to some of the positives, like the introduction of railways.

That the authors of this book regarded this as a fundamental enough point to include in a section of their introduction entitled 'This is controversial history' would indicate that balance sheet framings are likely to become less ubiquitous in future textbooks. Nevertheless, the fact that all the core Year 8 books in our sample currently do present this type of framing is notable.

Anglocentric narratives: forging a positive national identity

Consideration of the apparent 'benefits' of British imperial rule leads to another key area of comparison between traditional and contemporary textbooks, which relates to Anglocentric narratives and the idea of building a positive sense of national identity among readers. As the textbooks in the first sample were written for children who, it was assumed, would grow up to be imperial subjects, while those in the second were not, it is unsurprising that the traditional textbooks generally present more unproblematic celebratory accounts of the apparent achievements of British imperial rule. For many traditional textbook authors, the imposition of Western customs on colonised peoples, and the elimination of their own local practices, is presented uncritically as something positive. Knowledge is assumed to flow in one direction only – it is considered desirable for colonised peoples to 'learn' to become more Western, but there is no mention of Europeans learning anything from non-Europeans. Textbook F (1932: 12) states that some colonised peoples 'have learned to live in ways which are much like our own, while others are only just beginning to learn about cities, railways, motors and the cinema, and many hundreds of thousands of them have never heard of these things'. This associates progress/modernity with lifestyles 'like our own' (that is, British), while others can only 'learn' to live in modern ways (from 'us'), and should aspire to do so. Such knowledge may be presented as originating in Britain, Europe or the West more generally, and in one notable case, it is attributed specifically to 'the white man':

> Missionaries and teachers labour unceasingly to help the Africans to learn all that the white man can tell them, while doctors and nurses serve hospitals where those suffering from disease

> can come to be treated. None of this would have been possible if those countries had not been opened up by the white man, and so it may be claimed that the Empire's civilizing work in Africa has been, on the whole, a blessing to mankind. (Textbook J, 1934: 243)

Traditional textbooks frequently extend statements about what the British 'brought' to other parts of the world to more abstract concepts such as 'peace' and 'justice', which are often extremely misleading, not only in terms of the assumption that these could only have been achieved under British imperial rule, but also in the suggestion that they were achieved under imperial rule at all. Textbook J (1934) frames such an account in economic terms, citing the potential to extract minerals as one of the main universal benefits of British imperialism:

> Tin and copper are mined on a great scale, and numberless other things are produced that could never have been obtained before the peace and justice that the Empire gives to all its citizens were brought to the natives of Africa by the labours of the British officials who have devoted their lives to the colonial service. (Textbook J, 1934: 243)

The author's claim that the Empire brought peace and justice to Africa is demonstrably false (see, for example, Benton, 2024; Elkins, 2022), but potentially highly appealing to British readers of the time, as it implies that without British power there can be nothing but chaos and 'injustice'. Textbook K (1939: 54) similarly suggests that 'Under British rule, wars and famines were soon forgotten among the teeming millions of Indians.'

While this type of uncritical patriotic narrative focusing on 'our' achievements is not present in the same way in most of the contemporary textbooks, similar accounts are again still often present as 'one side' in balance sheet framings, as discussed above. In Textbook L (2015: 90), for example, an Indian child from 1900 is pictured stating that 'the British make sure that the children of Indian soldiers are given good education in schools'. Although this is presented as one perspective, rather than as part of an authoritative 'factual' narrative, the underlying assumption is still that the British 'brought education to India', as though there would have been no education otherwise. Textbook M (2018) also presents a list of 'achievements' of the British Empire in India, although in this case with some qualification in terms of how these apparent benefits mainly benefited the British themselves. In this case, the information is presented as an authoritative narrative in the authors' voice, rather than as fictionalised accounts from different people impacted by the Empire, so students are not asked to critically engage with the authors' account, and thus this apparently 'balanced' account can be accepted as true and complete. For example, they write, 'In the 19th century, the British built over 24,000 miles of railway track in India to increase trade. … Whilst industry provided jobs for local Indians, their wages were low and they had to endure very poor working conditions' (Textbook M, 2018: 148). In this apparently neutral and balanced account, although it is clear that the railways were not the unqualified positive development they are often presented as in earlier textbooks, Britain is still the key agent and 'provider', while Indians are presented as having had no choice but to accept badly paid work. Such accounts also rely on the type of assumptions discussed by Satia (2020: 277) in relation to balance sheet framings, 'the idea that, absent the British presence, there would be no railroads or dams or any sort of "progress"'.

Related to this, many traditional textbook authors emphasise what they present as British 'good intentions', implying that anything negative that happened as a result of British rule was simply due to the British authorities not knowing about it, or not yet having realised it was a problem. Textbook E (1927) attributes the Irish famine of the 1840s exclusively to the failure of potato crops, and suggests that the British government's only relevant action was to try to improve the situation through legislative changes: 'the potato crop failed, and there was a terrible famine. … It was *the Irish Famine* that spurred on Sir Robert Peel to repeal the Corn Laws the year afterwards (1846)' (Textbook E, 1927: 221–2). Textbook P makes a rather similar claim almost one hundred years later, suggesting that, early on, the British authorities were simply unaware of the famine, and that as soon as they became aware, they stepped in to help:

> News spread to England that the Irish people were dying in their thousands … In the summer of 1846, the British government bought large quantities of American maize to feed Ireland's population … In 1847, Parliament voted through the Soup Kitchen Act, which provided soup kitchens to feed 3 million of Ireland's population. (Textbook P, 2022: 61)

Textbook P (2022: 61) does concede that 'these measures were too little and too late', but, like Textbook E in 1927, this account does not consider how British actions exacerbated the problem. This allows English readers to feel reassured that their government always acts, and always has acted, in the best interests of the people it governs.

The idea of the British as 'protectors' of those they 'came to govern' (this type of passive construction which removes direct agency from the imperialists is common in pre-Second World War books) is pervasive in traditional textbooks, with authors often using extremely disparaging terms to refer to those who were apparently in need of such protection. Textbook B (1921: 202–3) states that in the early nineteenth century 'it became an accepted principle that the politically and socially backward dependencies of our Empire must be administered in the interests of their inhabitants'. As is typical in these older books, the adjective 'backward' is applied here as though it were a universal objective fact, rather than a subjective Western perspective, and Textbook B seems to imply that because this was (apparently) an 'accepted principle', this is then what happened in practice – there is no indication here that this was not always (or even usually) true, meaning that any cruelties that did occur could be cited as unfortunate exceptions to a generally benevolent rule. Those in the position of apparently needing to be protected are assumed to be incapable of looking after themselves or organising their own societies, despite having done so for hundreds or thousands of years before the arrival of the British. They are also assumed to be unable to speak for themselves: Textbook C (1924: 341–2), also referring to an apparent change in British attitudes to Empire in the nineteenth century, suggests that British people were learning to regard themselves as 'friends and protectors of the primitive peoples, who had hitherto had no spokesmen'.

This emphasis on British 'good intentions' is specifically used to obscure British responsibility for colonial violence and genocide. A common approach in traditional textbooks involves presenting such violence as an unfortunate fact of nature, as Textbook B (1921: 96) does in relation to the devastation of Aboriginal populations in Australia: 'Though on the whole they have met with fair treatment from settlers, and though Christian missionaries have tried to fit them for modern conditions of life, their numbers have gradually dwindled till very few exist today.' History is thus assumed to be a linear process of modernisation – modernity simply happens, and if certain groups of people are not 'fit' to cope with it, they will unfortunately die out. Accordingly, the arrival of Europeans is not an active and violent process of invasion and land appropriation, but simply the inevitable arrival of 'modernity'. The British are framed as benevolently trying to 'help' people adapt to this apparently naturally occurring modernity (Indigenous people are given no agency of their own in this), rather than as actively causing the existential threat. If Indigenous people persistently 'fail to adapt', this is implied to be because their supposedly primitive natures are incompatible with modernity (or, alternatively, because they are not working hard enough). Notably, Textbook B does not give details of what the author considers such 'fair treatment' to be, and clearly he does not consider that British people arriving on foreign shores and taking over Indigenous land is in itself 'unfair'.

The common idea that British colonisers should be understood as protectors of 'weaker' groups, rather than as a threat, still appears in some contemporary textbooks, and it is particularly notable in Textbook P (2022: 13), where the authors write that despite the appointment in 1838 of an 'Aboriginal Protector to Australia', 'it has been estimated that between 1788 and 1900, Australia's First Nation population decreased by 90%'. This framing removes all responsibility for the genocide of this population from the British, who are presented as doing nothing but attempt to protect the First Nation population; just like the author of Textbook B (1921), they suggest that despite these efforts, this population apparently simply 'decreased' by itself. The idea that population decline was somehow natural and had nothing to do with the actions of colonists echoes patterns from the traditional textbooks such as Textbook B (see above). Similarly, in a section on North America, the authors suggest that Indigenous dispossession occurred as a result of US independence from Britain, rather than because of the actions of British colonisers. Here again, Britain is framed as a protector of Indigenous peoples:

> Britain had forbidden the colonists to settle in the interior of the continent and gave official protection to the Native Americans who lived there. However, when Britain lost its American colonies in 1783, it also gave up any hope of honouring its treaties with the indigenous people(s). (Textbook P, 2022: 72)

There is no discussion of the fact that Indigenous peoples only needed 'protection' at all because of British colonisation, or of any Indigenous resistance to being dispossessed of their lands. Thus,

Indigenous people are presented as entirely passive and completely helpless without British 'official protection', and it is also clearly, and extremely misleadingly, implied that Britain had intrinsically benevolent intentions towards Indigenous peoples.

Conversely, Textbook N (2019) demonstrates how the 'protection' of First Peoples referred to in Textbook P was conditional, and was based on implicit threats of violence:

> When the Aborigines tried to resist British colonisation, they faced terrible violence. In the 1820s, there were brutal wars between the British and the Aborigines on the island of Tasmania. The governor of Tasmania, George Arthur, ordered this poster to be nailed to trees. It was meant to show the Aborigines that they were protected by the British, but the reality was very different. Many Tasmanian Aborigines were shot on sight, including women and children. (Textbook N, 2019: 165)

The poster is clearly threatening – it shows an Aboriginal person being executed after apparently attacking a settler, as well as a settler being executed after attacking an Aboriginal person, so it is entirely understandable that local Indigenous people did not understand this as a reassurance that they would be protected. Meanwhile, Textbook Q (2023: 51) explains how 'Aboriginal Protection Acts' were used to remove First Peoples to segregated reserves, and to forcibly remove children from their parents.

Overall, then, although the types of overtly celebratory patriotic narratives typical of traditional textbooks are not present in the same ways in contemporary textbooks, certain echoes of these previous assumptions are still present, as seen in the above ideas about good intentions and benevolence.

Conclusions and future directions

Visual differences between history textbooks written in the era of the 'great tradition' and those in use today are immediately obvious on picking up the books: the attractively presented contemporary textbooks are entirely distinct from the dull, dense black-and-white text of the older books, featuring an array of photographs, cartoons, illustrations, documents and artefacts presented in full colour to attract students' interest. In most cases, at least some of these sources are included to actively engage students in historical enquiry; as shown above, almost all the contemporary textbooks in our sample prioritise, at least in theory, giving students access to a wide range of historical evidence, and focus activities around engaging in historical enquiry, critically evaluating evidence and interpretations, and developing skills such as historical writing. Most contemporary textbook authors have also carefully considered how to provide students with a wider range of perspectives and interpretations than were traditionally available. This suggests that, despite repeated attempts by conservative elements to force a return to a more traditional model of history education in England, in general, many elements of the new history paradigm remain dominant. However, this is not universally true, as shown by the outlier in our contemporary sample, Textbook P (2022), which rejects many of the principles of new history, presenting in contrast a much more traditional single 'factual' narrative. This book does not ask students to interrogate sources or to compare interpretations, and generally it does not discuss developing students' historical skills or conceptual understanding. Aside from this, most of the contemporary textbooks show some signs of compromise between traditional pedagogy and new history – all the books present some factual elements of history in the authors' own voices, and several include exercises testing students' recall of factual information, as well as exercises involving interpretation, as in Textbook O (2020), which includes multiple-choice quizzes at the end of every unit.

Aside from these findings, our analysis reveals two notable issues in contemporary textbooks, as well as evidence that both are being addressed in the newest textbook in our sample, Textbook Q (2023). First, although many contemporary authors have clearly considered the implications of the range of sources they include, and are careful in how they guide students to consider a range of perspectives in evaluating these critically, in practice, the sources presented still tend to disproportionately represent the voices of British colonial elites. This reflects the well-recognised issue of who has historically been more likely to have their words or artwork recorded or preserved (Hartman, 2008). The reality that authors seem to have access to far fewer sources that tell stories from the perspectives of colonised or enslaved people is particularly evident in the fact that three of the six contemporary textbooks in our sample use extracts from the same text, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, as sources. The newest textbook in our sample, however, includes a much wider range of voices and perspectives than most of the others, and

the authors make a point of including historical sources produced by Indigenous and colonised people in different parts of the British Empire, for example, a 1769 drawing by an artist from Tahiti (Textbook Q, 2023: 52), as well as the words of Indigenous and/or postcolonial writers such as Eric Williams (Textbook Q, 2023: 12). Textbook Q is a single-topic depth study, but a core Key Stage 3 textbook series published by Hodder in 2024 (Counsell et al., 2024) appears to take a similar approach, with a large and diverse team of authors, and aiming to 'Reframe familiar topics, discover forgotten stories and amplify unheard voices' (Hodder Education, 2024: n.p.).

A second issue is the ongoing pervasiveness of 'balance sheet' approaches to assessing the impact of British imperialism, with five of the six contemporary textbooks in our sample presenting such framings. Even textbooks published in the last two to four years seem to be based on an assumption that there is a need to provide a 'balanced' view of British imperialism, presenting students with just as many apparent 'benefits' as negative impacts, with the implication being that imperialism should be regarded as morally neutral overall. In fact, research has shown that balance sheet framings are also widespread in media and public discourses around British imperialism, where commentators may wish, or at least feel that they have an obligation, to demonstrate a sense of 'neutrality' (Branford, 2023). Some forms of balance sheet framing may be less problematic than others; for example, Textbook M (2018: 144–55) asks students to consider the impacts of empire in terms of who benefited and who was harmed. This avoids a key problem with framings that ask students to compare the 'positives' and 'negatives' of empire, where the suggestion that 'Britain did good, but Britain also did harm' may still ask students to uncritically accept as truth statements about various ways in which Britain supposedly 'did good'. Nevertheless, even in this case, there may be an implication that if just as many people benefited from British imperialism as were harmed by it, this somehow 'balances out' into moral neutrality. Here, Textbook Q (2023: 2) again demonstrates that this issue is understood and is being challenged by many of those now involved in writing and publishing textbooks.

The fact that such issues are now being addressed is likely to be a reflection of a general increased awareness of topics related to British imperial history among the UK public. Such topics currently have a high profile in both culture and media, with many popular books, television series and podcasts available focused on the British Empire, and regular discussions on the subject in news media and political discourse. Notably, many of the best-known authors currently writing about the British Empire in the UK, such as David Olusoga, Sathnam Sanghera, Kehinde Andrews, Afua Hirsh and Akala, write from a range of perspectives in terms of race, class and family relationships to British imperial history and migration, meaning that members of the public in general now have easy access to a much wider range of perspectives than many would have had even a few years ago, potentially creating demand for a wider range of perspectives in education generally, and history education in particular. This also reflects recent trends in historiography, as well as in other disciplines, which increasingly emphasise the need to do more to include often marginalised voices and perspectives. Of course, like any widespread shift in public consciousness, these trends are also frequently challenged and contested. Even aside from this, in any history curriculum or textbook on British imperialism, there will always be gaps and silences because of the hugely complex nature of these histories and the vast range of specific themes and topics that could be taught.

A number of high-profile research and educational projects and studies relating to the teaching of British imperial history have also emerged in recent years, including the TIDE-Runnymede report on Teaching Migration, Belonging and Empire in Secondary Schools (McIntosh et al., 2019) and the UCL Legacies of British Slavery Database (Legacies of British Slavery, 2024), as well as our own EMB project, and continuing professional development initiatives such as Abdul Mohamud and Robin Whitburn's Justice to History project (Mohamud and Whitburn, 2016). Such developments offer the potential to further raise interest and awareness in relation to how the British Empire is taught and understood in educational settings and beyond.

In overview, then, this article offers a distinctive historical perspective on an issue of acute contemporary significance. It provides insights into how the British Empire has been portrayed in the changing landscape of history education and history textbook publication. It charts the impact of new history on history textbook development, critically appraises the current situation, and considers future opportunities and directions. Above all, the article is predicated on the belief that the past shapes and informs the present. As such, it aims to offer thought-provoking perspectives on some of the influential forces that have shaped, and continue to shape, young people's understandings of the British Empire across successive generations.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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Appendix A. Traditional textbook sample

In-text reference	Details
Textbook A	Wilmot-Buxton, E. (1920) *Highroads of History, Book 8: Highroads of empire history*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons. • Aimed at younger readers, aged 10–11. *Highroads of History* was one of the most popular series of historical readers of its time (Cannadine et al., 2011; Yeandle, 2015).
Textbook B	Bulkeley, J.P. (1921) *The British Empire: A short history*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. • Two editions/six impressions published between 1921 and 1926.
Textbook C	Muir, R. (1924) *A Short History of the British Commonwealth, Volume 2, The modern Commonwealth. Part 5: The reconstruction of the Commonwealth* (A.D. 1815–1880). London: George Phillip. • Muir was a well-known historian and later a Liberal politician. This book is aimed at older students, aged 14+
Textbook D	Warner, G.T. and Marten, C.H.K. (1924) *The Groundwork of British History, Part 2: From the Union of the Crowns to the present day*. London: Blackie & Son. • Aimed at older students, aged 14+. This was one of the most popular textbooks of its time, and successive editions were in print from 1911 until 1965.
Textbook E	Marten, C.H.K. and Carter, E.H. (1927) *Histories, Book 4: The latest age*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. • Marten was a highly influential author, and Marten and Carter's *Histories* are among the best-known textbooks from this period.
Textbook F	Nunn, E. (1932) *History, Senior Course. Book One: The growth of the British Commonwealth*. London: Ginn & Co. • Nunn was a well-known author and principal of a teacher training college in Bristol.
Textbook G	Elliot, M.M.V. (1933) *Britain in Modern Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. • Aimed at younger students, 12 and under. Three editions published between 1930 and 1960.
Textbook H	Tickner, F.W. (1933) *Days of Empire*. London: University of London Press. • Part of the Headway Histories series, which was published in several editions over a period of around twenty years.
Textbook I	Dance, E.H. (1934) *Britain in the Modern World, Since 1714*. London: Longman. • Aimed at older students, aged 14+. New editions were produced until 1965.

Textbook J	Newton, A.P. (1934) *A Junior History of the British Empire Oversea.* London: Blackie & Son. • Newton was Rhodes Professor of Imperial History at King's College London. This book was 'written at the suggestion and with the approval and support of the Education Committee of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce of the British Empire and of the Imperial Studies Committee of the Royal Empire Society' (Newton, 1934: vii), so it can be considered an example of imperial propaganda, as well as a school textbook.
Textbook K	Lay, E.J.S. (1939) *The Modern Class-Book of English History, Senior Book 5: Victoria and modern times.* London: Macmillan. • Lay wrote multiple textbooks for Macmillan on subjects including history, geography and science. His books are typically produced in soft-cover, 'pamphlet' style, so were presumably more affordable for schools than the more typical hardback books.

Appendix B. Contemporary textbook sample

In-text reference	Details
Textbook L	Clare, J.D., Bates, N., Fisher, A. and Kennett, R. (2015) *Making Sense of History 1745–1901*. London: Hodder.
Textbook M	Rees, R., Nuttall, D. and Tomlin, D. (2018) *Exploring History: Cavaliers, colonies & coal*. London: Pearson.
Textbook N	Riley, M., Ford, A., Goudie, K., Kennett, R. and Snelson, H. (2019) *Understanding History: Britain in the wider world, Roman times–present.* London: Hodder.
Textbook O	Wilkes, A. (2020). *Revolution, Industry and Empire: Britain 1558–1901.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Textbook P	Aitken-Burt, L., Peal, R. and Selth, R. (2022) *Modern British and World History, 1760–1900.* London: Collins. • This is one of a series of textbooks, *Knowing History*, which are updated and extended versions of a series originally written by Robert Peal as the sole author and published between 2016 and 2019, and much of the content that was relevant to our study is identical or very similar to the equivalent sections in Peal's *Modern Britain 1760–1900* (Peal, 2017). Peal is a significant figure in contemporary history education, having served as 'Teacher in Residence' at the Department for Education from 2015 to 2016, and as an advisor and speech writer to Nick Gibb. He is also the author of *Progressively Worse* (Peal, 2014), published by the think tank Civitas, in which he discusses what he regards as overly 'progressive' trends in British education generally.
Textbook Q	Allen, T., Barma, S., Durbin, E., Hibbert, D., Kennett, R., Patel, Z., Quinn, E., Stevenson, M., Stewart, F., Thorne, S. and Yasmin, S. (2023) *A New Focus on… The British Empire c. 1500–Present.* London: Hodder.