

Melanie Bassett – The Royal Dockyard worker in Edwardian England: culture, leisure and empire

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This thesis is a detailed study of the influence of imperialism on the English working-class male during the period of 'high imperialism'. Recent debate on the impact of imperialism on the British working class has split academics between those who argue in favour of an imperial dominant ideology and those who question its impact. The thesis will address this disparity and make an original contribution to the historiography of British imperialism by examining discourses of 'top down' imperialism alongside working-class responses to evaluate their impact and highlight examples of cultural agency.

By using a detailed study of the Portsmouth Royal Dockyard worker the thesis highlights the importance of local experiences in mediating the imperial narrative. The impact of workplace relations in the community, the civic elites, the provincial press and commercial leisure are explored to provide a nuanced understanding of how these processes worked in practice. Portsmouth's Royal Dockyard worker provides an interesting case study as the town's economic prosperity rested with the presence of the Admiralty in the town. The Royal Dockyard workers were the largest industrial group in the town and possessed a unique perspective as employees of the state. They were instrumental in the building and maintenance of the British Fleet, which continued to gain increasing interest during the Edwardian period due to the escalation of the Naval Arms Race with Germany and the other world powers. Their lack of trade union activity in comparison to northern and midland industrialised towns and the reliance on the strength of the Royal Navy to provide them with employment has led to assumptions that Royal Dockyard workers were deferential and subservient to the Admiralty and economically pre-disposed to "naval imperialism."

This study will offer a unique perspective on the study of imperialism by illustrating, not just how the working classes were subjected to imperialism from 'above', but how they were able to use concepts of empire to their own advantage. Rather than being subservient, deferential and economically predisposed to being 'imperialists' the thesis will argue that the workforce of the Royal Dockyard were active in their approaches to British imperial thought.