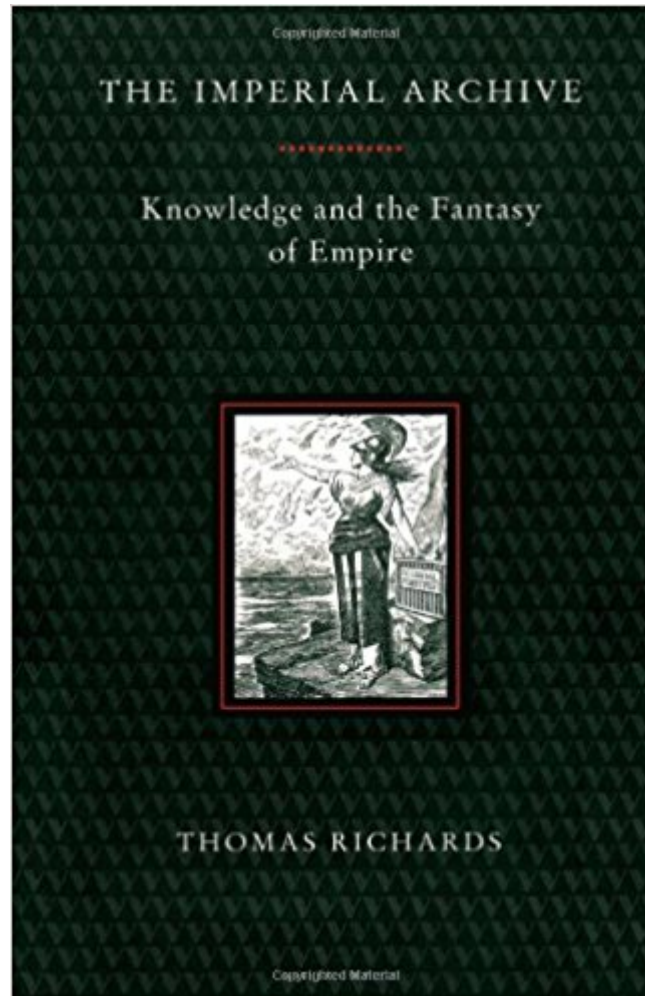




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The Imperial Archive: Knowledge And The Fantasy Of Empire



Synopsis

Nineteenth-century Britain could be seen as the first information society in history – for the simple reason that it accumulated knowledge from the far-flung corners of its empire faster than it could easily digest it. The British Empire presented a vast administrative challenge; by meeting that challenge through maps and surveys, censuses and statistics, Victorian administrators developed a new symbiosis of knowledge and power. The narratives of the late nineteenth century are full of fantasies about an empire united not by force or civil control but by information. In *The Imperial Archive*, Thomas Richards analyzes the ways in which the Victorian organization of knowledge was enlisted into the service of the British Empire, as fields like biology, geography and geology began to function almost as extensions of British intelligence. Richards argues that the techniques invented for managing this information explosion established an enduring axis between knowledge and the state and also suggested a powerful new direction for the novel. He illustrates his argument by careful reference to a variety of institutions – above all the growth of the museum – and texts, including works by Rudyard Kipling, Erskine Childers, H.G. Wells and Bram Stoker.

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Customer Reviews

Thomas Richards is Associate Professor of English and American literature at Harvard University. He is the author of *The Commodity Culture of Victorian Britain: Advertising and Spectacle 1851–1914* and *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*. From the Hardcover edition.

If knowledge is power, then the crossroads between the acquisition and exploitation of knowledge surely holds the key to imperial ambitions. This is an excellent study in the imagination and creation of empire, and how knowledge and various forms of narratives articulate the shape of power and imperial space. Highly recommended.

Drawing on an impressive, if at times daunting, amount of literary and critical material, Thomas Richards' *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* achieves a clarity and force not often reached in the murky and oft-maligned realm of Information Theory. Information Theory? Don't run and hide, it only sounds scary. Richards has done something new here: he has combined two fields usually considered boring and overly-cerebral --Information Theory and Literary Criticism-- and by their union has made them interesting and informative. *The Imperial Archive* explores what the British Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries was really all about by looking at how it's servants and institutions viewed information acquisition and dissemination. He does this by reviewing the great works of literature of the time which impact on this question. This is another great strength of the work: readers will find themselves with the bibliography of their dreams. From Kipling to Hilton (*Lost Horizon*), from Wells to Childers (*The Riddle of The Sands*) and from Pynchon to Heller, Richards' use and command of these and other great authors makes for very stimulating and elucidating reading. His exploration of non-fiction material is also an important element in what is a truly interdisciplinary work, studying, for instance, the relationship between geography and espionage (Hopkirk's *The Great Game*) and the scientific approach to ballistics as a metaphor for the human dilemma (again, Pynchon). I highly recommend this work, even for those of you not usually interested in this type of critical reference. It may be the only book of it's kind you ever read, but you will be happy you did so, if only for the years of thoughtful reading you will have ahead of you --as I said, the bibliography of your dreams.

A compact, but dense book about the implications of empire (as much the idea of empire as the actual entity) for the dissemination and transmission (and the manipulation and hoarding) of information. The author starts from the premise that to be the guardian of an empire is to wish for the ultimate archive: a wealth of information that allows you to know and control every aspect of your territory's life, whether the territory is real (as with the British Empire) or imagined (as in the several works of fiction, including Bram Stoker's "*Dracula*," James Hilton's "*Lost Horizon*," and Rudyard Kipling's "*Kim*," that the author analyzes). A highly recommended and absolutely

enthraling book.

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