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Introduction: The British World

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The concept of a British World is not new. The term was used in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and persisted into the 1960s. Then, as now, not all of those who used the term would have agreed on its precise meaning. At its heart, however, was the conception that British imperialism was more than the mere exploitation of overseas territories for commercial gain: it was about the establishment of British communities overseas and the extension of British values to non-British communities around the globe.

At the Second Imperial Press Conference, held in Ottawa in 1920, Lord Burnham, the editor of the London *Daily Telegraph*, described the British World as “a world of many homes.”¹ For Lord Burnham, the most important of these homes would have been those inhabited by people of British origin. In the century after 1815, something around 22.4 million people left the British Isles with another three million or so emigrating from the 1920s to the 1950s. The majority of the nineteenth-century migrants settled in the United States, and they have been aptly described as “invisible immigrants” because they were forced to accept the values of the host community whose members were born in the United States and whose forefathers had fought to leave the British World during the American Revolution.²

A substantial minority of the nineteenth-century British migrants, however, and a majority of those who left Britain from 1900 until the 1950s, settled within the British Empire. In Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the British settled in sparsely-populated areas where they were able to overwhelm the indigenous populations and create a series of colonies with British majorities. In parts of Asia and Africa, they settled in smaller numbers amidst much more substantial numbers of indigenous peoples, and only in South Africa, in a rather unsteady alliance with the larger Afrikaner population, were the British able to form a large enough minority that apparently they could rule indefinitely over the indigenous majority. The large colonies that formed the inner core of the British World were at the heart of what Sir Charles Dilke called “Greater Britain.”³

In the 1950s and 1960s, as the empire was transformed into the modern Commonwealth composed predominantly of African and Asian states that did not have British majorities and that rejected much of the legacy of empire, the whole notion of a British World quickly

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crumbled. In the era of decolonisation, the British Empire came to be seen not as an instrument for the establishment of British communities overseas and of British liberal values around the globe but simply as an instrument of oppression. The central theme of imperial historiography became the acquisition, management, and exploitation of non-British peoples overseas.

This theme, almost of subjugation, was legitimate and important but it marginalized the significance of what was called the colonies of settlement, or after 1907, the self-governing Dominions. To most Canadian, Australian, or New Zealand historians who began writing in the 1960s, the imperial past was at best irrelevant and at worst embarrassing. They sought to invent new conceptions of national identity that focused on the multicultural roots of their societies and on the need to compensate the native peoples who had been dispossessed of their lands by the European invasion. These new interpretations did not go uncontested and became the subject of what has been called in Australia "The History Wars."

A few professional historians in the Dominions wished to focus on the imperial past not out of nostalgia but simply out of a desire to understand the significant role played by the Empire in the history of the Dominions and of the Dominions in the history of the Empire. But they found themselves ignored both at home by historians concerned with issue of national identity and in Britain where most imperial history was still being written. The emphasis of the new imperial historiography was very clearly not on the benefits bestowed on non-British peoples by the extension of British rule around the globe but on the exploitative nature of British imperialism and its largely negative impact on the large number of non-Europeans incorporated into the Empire against their wishes.

A strong materialist bias to the new historiography did not draw a clear line between those parts of the world formally under British rule (usually painted red on British maps of the globe) and the so-called "informal empire" which, never formally annexed to the Empire, could be expanded to include large parts of Asia and South America. The new imperial history focused on the small inner core of politicians and civil servants in London which formed what John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson called the "official mind" of British Imperialism. The members of this small elite were seen as "reluctant imperialists" who responded to pressures from the governors of colonies and from various lobbies in Britain with overseas interests to protect — those who sought to rule as indirectly as possible with the assistance of local collaborators.⁴ This vision of Empire had little room for the neo-Britains created overseas by British immigrants and their descendants. In 1901, the *Toronto Globe* described the neo-Britains as "the Britons of Greater Britain"⁵ who saw themselves not as imperial collaborators but as partners in the imperial enterprise.

The importance of the Dominions has oft-times received limited recognition, for example in the two-volume history of *British Imperialism* by P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, probably the most influential book published on imperial history in the 1990s.⁶ As Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich have argued, however, the Cain and Hopkins vision of empire was also "narrowly elitist in scope and economically deterministic."⁷ The old Dominions fared even less well in the recently-published five-volume Oxford History of the British Empire, where the colonies of British settlement are treated as marginal rather than as central in the evolution of the British Empire.⁸

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As early as 1974, the New Zealand-born British historian, J.G.A. Pocock, attempted to remind historians of the existence of a wider British World but his plea for a new history that included overseas British communities was largely ignored.⁹ The publication in 1992 of Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* unleashed a vigorous debate over the importance of the Empire in defining what it meant to be "British,"¹⁰ forcing imperial historians to reconsider the notion that the empire was bound together not simply by trade and commerce but by a shared sense of identity among Britons at home and abroad. Indeed, an intellectual culture once existed based on the belief in the existence of a British World.

Of course, what it meant to be "British" was always open to a variety of interpretations – frequently conflicting ones – both in Britain and in the British colonies. Its meaning was always contested. "Britishness" was an ideal open to conservative, liberal, and even socialist interpretations. Although most strongly held by migrants from the British Isles and their descendents, it could be embraced by those whose roots were not in the British Isles, including many non-whites, and who found the idea of belonging to the world's largest and most progressive empire appealing. This shared but contested intellectual culture was the real glue of the empire and explains the survival of the notion of a British World well into the 1950s.

This at least was the assumption that the lay behind the decision to hold a conference on "The British World: Culture, Diaspora, Identity" at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, part of the School of Advanced Studies of the University of London, in June 1998. The conference was so successful that it was decided to hold a series of conference in the old Dominions.¹¹ The first in the series took place at the University of Cape Town in January 2002; the second was at the University of Calgary in July 2003. The Calgary conference was hosted by the Humanities Institute and attracted over 120 papers, including the articles that appear in this issue of *History of Intellectual Culture*. The articles give some idea of the range of topics that were discussed at the conference, focusing on how notions of "Britishness" could be interpreted differently by Newfoundlanders from the 1920s to the 1950s, by British women in India between the 1890s and 1945, by British settlers in the Transvaal in the 1880s, by more recent British immigrants to Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s, and how these notions could lead to debates over such issues as the "British" legacy of a free press. In due course, we hope that a larger collection of papers from the conference will be published by the University of Calgary Press. Future conferences in Melbourne (2004), Auckland (2005), and London (2006) will continue to explore the idea of a British World that is still worthy of scholarly enquiry.¹²

Notes

1. Quoted in Simon J. Potter, "Communication and Integration: The British and Dominions Press and the British World, c. 1876-1914," in *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity*, ed. Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 190.

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2. Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants to Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Wiedenfield and Nicholson, 1972).
3. See Sir Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries during 1866 and 1867*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1868).
4. See Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vol. V, no. 1 (1953): 1-15.
5. *Toronto Globe*, 25 September 1901.
6. P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, Vol. 1: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914; and Vol. 2: Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914-1990* (London: Longman, 1993).
7. Bridge and Fedorowich, *The British World*, 2.
8. For a critique of the Oxford History of the British Empire, see P. A. Buckner, "Was there a 'British' Empire? The Oxford History of the British Empire from a Canadian Perspective," *Acadiensis*, 32 (2002): 110-28.
9. J.G.A. Pocock, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," *New Zealand Journal of History*, 8 (1974): 3-21.
10. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1701-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).
11. See P.A. Buckner and Carl Bridge, "Reinventing the British World," *The Round Table*, no. 368 (2003): 77-88.
12. By the time this issue of the *History of Intellectual Culture* is published, the conference in Melbourne will have taken place but anyone interested in participating in the conference in Auckland on 14-16 July 2005 should consult the University of Auckland History Department web-site at www.arts.auckland.ac.nz or Dr. Jennifer Frost at j.frost@auckland.ac.nz.