

Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850-1914

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There is a long-standing tradition of joint-authored works that seek to understand the economics of British imperialism from the perspective of its underlying cultural assumptions and practices. Robinson and Gallagher's 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' in the 1950s was an early example, while more recent partnerships include Davis and Huttenback's *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire* and Cain and Hopkins's two volume *British Imperialism*.⁽¹⁾ Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson's *Empire and Globalisation* is a worthy addition to the genre, offering a highly nuanced account of the culture and economics of the 'British World' in the nineteenth century based on a staggering range of primary and secondary sources. It is a genuinely interdisciplinary exercise, drawing widely on the authors' strengths as economic and imperial historian respectively.

Equally apparent is the influence of new scholarly trends and influences that have emerged since the appearance of Cain and Hopkins seventeen years ago. Over the past decade there has been a pronounced narrowing of the gap between imperial history and the study of 'globalisation' – indeed, the ranks of imperial historians who have branched out to transnational, global and world history reads like a roll call of the profession.⁽²⁾ In a world of competitive research grants, 'impact factors', and a debilitating presentism in funding allocations, a cynic might wonder whether this has merely been a case of imperial history 'moving with the money'. But as the mounting volume of scholarship makes increasingly plain, the material forces, cultural implications and ideological consequences of European imperialism in centuries past have immediate resonances with the more recent experience of globalisation. Magee and Thompson are alive to

the contemporary relevance of their work in the post-GFC era, without allowing this to over-determine their focus or findings.

Empire and Globalisation seems particularly indebted to A. G. Hopkins's early forays into the overlap between the British imperial past and the 'ancestry' (p. xii) of globalisation.⁽³⁾ Although the term itself emerged out of the technological and communications revolution of more recent decades, Hopkins was among the first to identify a prehistory of globalisation in the transoceanic deployments of people, money and goods by European empires in centuries past. Others such as Niall Ferguson emphasised the fundamentally British nature of these historical antecedents (which he termed 'Anglobalization').⁽⁴⁾ Magee and Thompson provide a masterful synthesis of this burgeoning body of work, explaining how imperialism has come to be regarded as the 'precursor' to globalisation, or perhaps even its 'first wave' (p. 22). But more importantly, they seek a greater degree of precision and internal differentiation between the various faces of British imperialism, taking issue with the common preconception that globalisation is 'a culturally blind, technology-driven phenomenon' (p. 233). They argue that the defining characteristics of what is generally understood by globalisation – the world-wide dissemination of goods, capital, labour, information and culture across wide oceans – have their origins in the mass outward migration of British settlers from the mid-19th century to the outbreak of the First World War.

It is here that Magee and Thompson draw on a further recent innovation in imperial historiography, namely the concept of the 'British World'. The term has its origins in a series of conferences from 2002–7 devoted to the peculiar qualities and shared characteristics of British settler colonies in their commercial, cultural and political experience of empire and 'Britishness' in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁽⁵⁾ This new departure was partly a response to a perception that settler societies had slipped off the radar of British imperial historiography⁽⁶⁾, but it also tied in with the growing interest in the origins and evolution of British identity in the wake of seminal studies by Linda Colley and others in the 1990s. To date, 'British World' scholarship has produced a series of conference volumes along with some prominent journal articles and specialist monographs.⁽⁷⁾ But it is only with the publication of *Empire and Globalisation* that it has produced a major book-length study of the concept itself (with the possible exception of James Belich's *Replenishing the Earth* which, however, favours a more expansive notion of the 'Anglo-world').⁽⁸⁾ Magee and Thompson have thus made a crucial contribution towards filling a conspicuous void, while at the same time investing the British world with some much-needed conceptual and empirical ballast.

What the authors firmly establish is that the British World needs to be taken seriously as a discrete historical phenomenon that profoundly altered the global landscape. There has been a tendency at times to dismiss work of this kind as a white, Anglo-centric fantasy – the historical companion to the 'Anglosphere' ideologues of the Bush-Blair era.⁽⁹⁾ *Empire and Globalisation* clearly shows that the unapologetic racism and chauvinism of British settler colonialism was much more than a self-legitimizing myth. On the contrary, the ideas and assumptions associated with 'Greater Britain' were instrumental in forging economic and commercial structures with tangible (and transformative) dimensions. Whether it was the investment decisions of British lending institutions, the consumption habits of settler populations, or the destination choice of individual migrants, culture was 'the matrix within which economic life occur[ed]' (p. 14). The commonplace belief in a global continuum of British peoples brought real material consequences, forging a 'cultural economy' with its own internal dynamic and logic. Moreover, Magee and Thompson regard this settler diaspora as integral to the emerging dynamics of a modern global economy, moving away from the 'hackneyed view of colonial markets as passive "bolt-holes or "safe havens" from the competitive forces of the international economy' (p. 118).

What's more, they have assembled a daunting array of empirical material in support of their claims. The cornerstone of the argument is the role of culture in forging global networks of trust that were the crucial enabling ingredient in the development of large scale trade, investment and migration patterns across huge distances. The revolution in transport and communications from the 1860s occasioned by steam power and telegraphy brought new potential for wider, and more integrated networks of global economic activity. But this potential could only be realised by overcoming the profound uncertainty that such a quantum leap entailed. Settler communities were ideally suited to experimentation, because by their very nature they

embraced a global network of social familiarity and (relatively) reliable contacts. This was reinforced by the fact that they were ‘co-ethnic groupings’ which ‘tended to instil trust and a mutual sense of obligation’ (p. 53). One does not need to condone the ethnocentric self-regard of 19th-century settlers to recognise their capacity to exploit their own racially exclusive self-image for commercial and financial ends. That these communities remained under British sovereignty, subject to the same rule of law and protected by the Royal Navy, also placed them ‘on a different plateau of reliability’ (p. 182) from most other potential overseas commercial ventures (including the United States, of which more in a moment). The flow of information and news was an important part of this. Knowledge was the handmaiden of investment, and its availability was never distributed evenly – the cultural networks that tied the British world into metropolitan society created an information network that was biased in favour of settler colonies. Thus the *Times* could inform its readers in 1901 that ‘the people of these colonies, brought up in a sound school of self-government and inheriting the best traditions of the mother country, may be trusted to work out their own destiny in a manly spirit and with the practical sagacity that marks the British race’ (p. 212).

It is through this prism that Magee and Thompson present countless compelling examples of the ‘cultural advantage’ that favoured global economic exchange in the British world. Thus they account for the steadily growing proportion of migrants seeking a new home in settler colonies; the high levels of British investment in those colonies despite relatively modest returns compared to opportunities elsewhere; the sustained flow of remittances from settler colonies back to the metropole; and the extraordinary capacity of the British World to absorb UK exports (with settler consumers spending upwards of three times more of their annual income on British goods than their European counterparts – and still more compared to the United States). Britain’s ‘non-market advantages’ (p. 133) in the settler colonies are discussed and documented at length, including professional diasporas, patent systems, business associations, and established lending practices and networks. In short, Magee and Thompson have made an impressive and lasting contribution, lending shape and depth to a concept that has hitherto been discussed in terms of ideas, beliefs, assumptions and associated generalities.

Pursuing the twin aims of charting the contours of the British World, while accounting for the imperial origins of globalisation is an exercise fraught with complexity – and attendant difficulties. Each could have provided the basis for a study in its own right, and their respective needs do not always dovetail neatly. Inevitably, there are long passages where the one or the other of book’s core claims is submerged in the interests of the other. The dual focus also raises a number of analytical problems. By no means all of the features of the 19th-century British world economy can be said to resemble globalisation in the sense we use the term today, and certain aspects seem almost antithetical to the concept. One of the distinguishing features of modern globalisation is its impersonal nature, its disregard for community boundaries which seems a long way from Magee and Thompson’s emphasis on the formative influence of culture and ethnocentrism. This they freely concede. As a corrective to Niall Ferguson they emphasise how

“imperial globalisation” ... was far from being truly global in its reach. Rather it was focussed on particular ethnic groups and exhibited a strong bias towards the empire’s anglophone societies ... these powerful exclusionary tendencies not only skewed the distribution of the economic gains that came from the British World, they ensured that the globalising forces of the pre-First World war era were circumscribed by geography and culture (p. 62, restated on p. 231).

One wonders, therefore, whether the twin agendas are mutually self-defeating – that the more successfully Magee and Thompson establish the ethnically ‘skewed distribution’ of the British world economy, the more questionable is their claim about its place in the genealogy of globalisation. In their conclusion they pose the dilemma themselves: ‘How could a series of distinct co-ethnic networks possibly have fostered a process of broader globalisation?’ (p. 237). Their most convincing shot at resolving the bind appears at the end of chapter two, when they discuss – perhaps too briefly – the instrumental relationship between ‘regionalised integration’ and broader globalisation (p. 63). Similarly, the authors freely acknowledge other 19th-century ‘precursors’ of globalisation – in the empires of France, Portugal, Spain, Germany and Italy, as well as the

Jewish, Chinese and South Asian diasporas. But the requirements of establishing the credentials of the British world effectively precludes any detailed comparative exploration of the claim – implicit throughout – that it was ‘Britain’s diaspora that left the largest single impression’ (p. 236). Here lies a potentially rich seam for future scholars to take up.

Two other key issues in the book are likely to provoke further debate and new lines of research. The first concerns the ‘racially circumscribed’ sinews of the British world (pp. 15, 20, 38, 44), and particularly the idea that ‘what it meant to be British became *increasingly* racially circumscribed’ (p. 57, my italics) as the 19th century wore on. Magee and Thompson are right to emphasise the ever-changing racial dynamics, but they offer little in the way of explanation as to why this was the case, or how this might have influenced (or been influenced by) the requirements of securing consumer and investor confidence in this early experiment in transoceanic networking. The book has relatively little to say about the ideological and rhetorical articulation of an expansive, racially inscribed Britishness, how this changed over time, and how it related to the phenomenon of 19th-century nationalism more generally. The likes of Charles Dilke, J. A. Froude and J. R. Seeley make surprisingly brief appearances, yet it would be interesting to explore the relationship between their ideas and the networks they spawned (or vice versa, as the case may be). More, too, could be said about the way that settler colonies ‘developed and defined “Britishness” in their own distinctive ways’ (p. 31).⁽¹⁰⁾ To what extent were these permutations rooted in (or entirely incidental to) divergent perspectives on the commercial and economic imperatives of being British? Magee and Thompson emphasise ‘how culture served to enhance economic integration, and how economic activity, in turn, served to enhance a sense of cultural interconnectedness’ (p. 44) but on the whole they refrain from distinguishing the chicken from the egg.

Secondly, there is an inherent – and perhaps insoluble – tension around the role of the United States, which is crucial to the question of whether the British settler colonial world is deserving of its own discrete category of analysis. To include the United States in the British World concept would tend to enhance the argument about the origins of globalisation, but at the same time it is disruptive of many key elements in the British World concept. The real problem, as Magee and Thompson demonstrate in impressive detail, is that the suit only partly fits. On the one hand, the United States appears as a model constituent of the British World economy, particularly as a destination for migrants, a major target of investment capital, and a reliable source of remittance payments.⁽¹¹⁾ On each of these counts, the United States was part of the same ethnically ‘skewed distribution’ of transoceanic traffic that characterised the British World, although this may have been more a case of shared language than a sense of co-ethnicity (another distinction worth further study). Yet the situation is entirely reversed when considering the United States as a market for British exporting industries. Magee and Thompson underline that British goods had nowhere near the same ‘non-market advantages’ in the United States as they enjoyed in the settler colonies; if anything, they were up against non-market barriers. This was partly because the American consumer market was far less homogenous ethnically (with migrants from other European countries surpassing British arrivals by the close of the century), but more importantly because United States markets did not share the free trade philosophy of their British counterparts. Clearly, the early achievement of separate (Republican) statehood placed the United States in a different – and inherently ambiguous – relationship with the British World. This was mirrored in the realm of culture and ideas, where the late-19th century saw the emergence of ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ as an ideological expression of the unity of the English-speaking peoples. But it lacked the relative unanimity and reciprocity that characterised settler colonial appeals to the ‘British race’. It is interesting to note that Charles Dilke originally included the United States in his 1868 concept of ‘Greater Britain’, but by the 1890s was compelled to revise his view on the grounds that their inclusion had never really caught on.⁽¹²⁾

Finally, a word about where the story ends. For Magee and Thompson, ‘this first wave of modern globalisation’ came ‘crashing down on the rocks of the war in Europe in 1914’ (p. 241). This is because the economic misery of the post-war era saw the British world turn inwards, effectively becoming a barrier to globalisation. I would agree that there is little to sustain the idea of the British World as an engine room of ‘first wave’ globalisation beyond 1914. Yet there is every reason to see many of the key components and

characteristics of the British World surviving down to the 1960s. British migrants continued to choose destinations within the imperial fold; the dominion governments (excluding Canada) continued to hold massive reserves in Sterling, long past the point when this unambiguously served their economic interests; and ideas about a special relationship of trust continued to influence popular perceptions of commercial and financial dealings throughout the British World. One need only recall the cries of ‘betrayal’ that reverberated around the world when the Macmillan government sought membership of the European Economic Community in 1961, to recognise that these tangled sinews of culture and commerce were a long time dying. In other words, *Empire and Globalisation* has far wider applications than the Victorian and Edwardian eras. It offers a rich table of food for thought that will influence future research agendas across a range of disciplines. It is also mercifully accessible, even to the most incurably innumerate. It is sure to be devoured and debated for years to come.

Notes

1. Lance E. Davis and Robert A. Huttenback’s *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Political Economy of British Imperialism, 1860-1912* (Cambridge, 1986); P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914* and *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction 1914-1990* (London, 1993). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A selection of the most prominent examples would include C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (Oxford, 2004); John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (London, 2007); James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2009); *Globalization in World History*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (London, 2002); Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the ‘Improvement’ of the World* (New Haven, CT, 2000); Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Melbourne, 2008); *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (Champaign, IL, 2009); *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present*, ed. Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woollacott Basingstoke (Basingstoke, 2010); *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire and Transnationalism, c.1880–1950*, ed. Kevin Grant, Philippa Levine and Frank Trentmann (London, 2007). These developments are not confined to studies of British imperialism, see for example *Das Kaiserreich Transnational: Deutschland in der Welt, 1871–1914* (Göttingen, 2004). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. In particular A. G. Hopkins, *Globalization in World History* (London, 2002); and *Global History: Interactions Between the Universal and the Local*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (London, 2006). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the Modern World* (London, 2003), p. xxii. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Held in Cape Town (2002), Calgary (2003), Melbourne (2004), Auckland (2005) and Bristol (2007). An earlier symposium was held at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London 1998. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See for example, P. A. Buckner, ‘Was there a “British” Empire? The Oxford History of the British Empire from a Canadian perspective’, *Acadiensis*, 32 (2002), 110–28. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London, 2003); P. A. Buckner and R. Douglas Francis, *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary, 2005); *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Cultures*, ed. Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw, Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne, 2007); Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: the Emergence of an Imperial Press System* (Oxford, 2003); P.A. Buckner and Carl Bridge, ‘Reinventing the British world’, *The Round Table*, 368 (2003), 77–88. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth* (Oxford, 2009). Another prominent contender is John Darwin’s *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System* (Cambridge, 2009), although he too casts his net wider than the settler colonies. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Discussed in Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, pp. 5–9. The Anglospherist perspective can be found in books and essays by James C. Bennett, *The Anglosphere Challenge: Why the English-speaking Nations will Lead the Way* (Plymouth, 2007); Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (London, 1999); and Andrew Roberts, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*

(London, 2006).[Back to \(9\)](#)

10. Formulated elsewhere as: 'Even English-speaking settlers who proclaimed their Britishness often meant different things by it' (p. 38).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Although on this latter point Magee and Thompson surmise that American remittance flows were often payments by settlers who intended to return 'home', rather than a means of sustaining the deep cultural and familial links between 'British' countries. See pp. 104–5.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain* (London, 1868); and *Problems of Greater Britain* (London, 1890).
[Back to \(12\)](#)

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