

Migration, Settlers and the British Empire

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Those disinclined to judge their book by its cover will be pleased to discover that the image adorning the latest volume in the *Oxford History of the British Empire (OHBE)* series bears little relation to its contents. Showing the famous long bar at the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, it presents the imperial British in exemplary (if not stereotypical) terms. Beneath heads of game and panels of oak, gentleman in knee socks and ladies in pink unwind amidst the chintz. This is a world we think we know, if only vaguely, set off by the old school tie, the college crest, the occasional boulder and the walrus moustache. But as Robert Bickers explains in his introductory essay, ideas about the British overseas are now woefully out of date. In part, this is due to a

fixation with the 'white' dominions – Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Cape; in part, it is due to an unthinking acceptance of a social order divided too neatly by 'settlers' and 'officials'. As the essays that comprise this volume show, the British of the empire were a diverse and disordered lot. Whether in the settler colonies of Rhodesia or Natal; in the expatriate outposts of Cairo, Calcutta or Shanghai, or in the plantation belts of Malaya or Ceylon, image and reality were never much the same. Even our staple terms of reference – British first of all – fray quickly at the touch.

In attempting to crack open that somewhat ossified category – the coloniser – Bickers and his team draw on a now considerable body of scholarly research. In the later 1980s Ann Stoler led the way, urging historians to apply the same level of critical rigor to colonising communities as they had done to the colonised.⁽¹⁾ Racism, the logic went, depended as much on the homogeneity of the colonisers as it did upon the supposed inferiority of 'native races'; no less important than the project to deconstruct 'the other', therefore, was the endeavour to appreciate the discord and disunity of colonisers themselves. A number of innovative social histories later appeared in this vein.⁽²⁾ And so, as testament to a transition from 'cutting edge' to 'new orthodoxy', the appearance of an *OHBE* volume on the subject provides a welcome intervention in (or consolidation of) the field. To critics, of course, the *OHBE* cannot help but lag behind the curve.⁽³⁾ But a weakness to some is to others a strength and it is a testament to the value of the *OHBE*'s companion series that it continues to bridge the gaps between the 'new' imperial history and the 'old'.⁽⁴⁾ After recent volumes devoted to Canada and Australia – two pillars of the British World – this edition turns to less familiar 'polyglot zones', beyond the military and administrative corps and the well-worn paths of kith and kin.⁽⁵⁾ It is a relief, it must be said, to get away from the archetypal figures of the settler, the missionary and the official: empire was always more polyphonus than that. And so here we find – besides the gentlemen and the ladies at the bar – the engineers, the electricians, the bankers and the brokers, the salesmen and the shop-keepers – not to mention the dockers, drifters, prostitutes and drunks whose lowly status and unpredictable behaviour consistently threatened to tarnish 'white prestige'. Take any social register you like – religion, class, occupation, world-view – and we find the British experience (to borrow from Louis MacNeice) 'crazier and more of it' that previously we had thought.

Nine regionally-focused chapters make up the volume, with an introduction from Bickers, an epilogue by Elizabeth Buettner on imperial Britons 'back home' and an afterword by John Darwin. 'Anywhere but the dominions', seems to be the line. So we have essays on cities (Shanghai), colonies (Kenya), Protectorates (Egypt), 'informal zones' (Argentina) and special cases (India). Natal, Rhodesia, Malaya and Ceylon make up the list. There were Britons elsewhere as well, of course (in the Caribbean, for example) but not enough perhaps to make the cut. Numbers and locations aside, it is the idea of community that provides the organising theme. It is also what provides the book's most intriguing conceptual dilemma. Notably, the only contributor to adopt the term in his title – David Washbrook on 'the British community in India' – devotes most of his essay to undermining the idea that such a thing existed at all. Robert Bickers opts for 'communities' in the plural, invoking a multiplicity of social formations that echoes in turn James Whidden's chapter on 'cosmopolitan' Egypt. The members' clubs, it transpires – ever the emblem of the imperial 'sporting life' – were not the only places where the British ventured after dark. In inter-war Cairo, one was as likely to come by hashish, cocaine or – most likely of all – venereal disease as one was a gin and tonic and a game of whist.

Imperial communities, of course, were defined by race in theory but in practice by cultural capital and social claim. The boundary lines were never stable and seldom strong. Inter-racial sex, it seems, was less exception than the rule; 'poor whites' were everywhere; distance from inferiors was only intermittently maintained. In Malaya, Tim Harper tells us, 'it is hard to tell where the 'European' population ended and the 'British' one began (p. 236). In India, the categories heave at the seams – between British, 'domiciled European', 'poor white', 'Anglo-Indian', 'Eurasian' and 'native'.⁽⁶⁾ In Argentina, children of British settlers were counted as local citizens in the census while 'foreign' English speakers (Americans for example) were incorporated as British (p. 18). There *was* no British community is the point – in any consistent or scientific sense at least.

Attempting to defend a community, however, served to define it nonetheless. For the individual, to successfully claim oneself as British entailed considerable rewards. Demarcating the grounds on which

inclusion could be judged, meanwhile, took place in a multiplicity of ways: in the imaginative and material landscaping of imperial space; in the creation of an institutionalised (and codified) social fabric; in the importing of habits, customs, styles and tastes. Community was described discursively as well, most notably in the publication of expatriate newspapers – the *Standard* in Argentina, the *Witness* in Natal, the *Herald* on the China coast. Publications such as these bound communities together and helped to plug them into a wider British world.

Through these and other means, the British strove to ‘make themselves at home’. Recreating home, however, could never render it completely. For many, separation from loved ones was the defining experience of empire but, in return for the cultural competence that a metropolitan schooling endowed, it was generally considered a hardship worth the cost (pp. 307–8). That competence was a passport after all. The expatriate and the settler, of course, were never quite the same but both lived somewhat in-between, caught between the homes that they made for themselves ‘out in the blue’ and that mythical and singular *home* from where their identity derived.⁽⁷⁾ It is this essentially ‘in-between’ state that explains so much of settler and expatriate culture and what binds many of these cases together. Calcutta, as Washbrook has it, was ‘always and emphatically’ a British city; Kenya settlers, Lonsdale writes, ‘gloried in the view’ but likened African hills to English downs. Identities were fluid, multiple and overlaid. Whilst the Natalians’ sense of identity was British, David Lambert argues, their sense of place was unequivocally Natal. ‘Three cheers for Shanghai’ called the leader of the first contingent of expat volunteers to leave from China for the Western Front in October 1914 (p. 269). Local patriotisms in any case did not compete with but, rather, gave voice to allegiance to the crown. Only in Rhodesia in 1965 did paths irreconcilably divide. What looked like disloyalty there, however, was to the settlers just the opposite: to them it was the British government, in appeasing African demands, who had strayed: separating from empire was – paradoxically – the truest means of keeping the imperial flame alive.

Most Britons overseas, however, never had such a choice to make. And just as empire meant homesickness to some, to others it gave the chance for hybrid reinvention. Travellers, sojourners, even (especially) British soldiers during the Second World War, enjoyed the vitality of Egypt; Malaya was a ‘kaleidoscopic world’; Buenos Aires matched freedom from restraint on the one hand with a newly-opened branch of Harrods on the other; newcomers to Ceylon in the 1940s were amazed at the volumes of alcohol that were commonly consumed. For many – the young and unencumbered especially (and men most of all) – their imperial years were some of their freest and most relaxed.

Such fond recollection, however, is inevitably filtered through the nostalgic lens of unplanned departures and mournful farewells. As Buettner’s chapter shows, for Britain’s imperial personnel the demise of the British Empire meant disenchantment most of all – the damp and draughty island that they encountered on return failing quite dramatically to resemble that Britain of the mind that had sustained them overseas. For these ‘orphans of empire’, as John Darwin calls them, homecoming entailed less of a restoration than a loss: the sights and sounds of Peckham could hardly match Penang. While men had their memories to console them, moreover, the women had it worse: sunshine was sorely missed but so too were the servants: who would do the washing now? For men and women both, life in post-war Britain meant a life without the respect that they had previously enjoyed. As ‘colonials’ they were looked upon as, if not inferior, then somehow incomplete; as post-imperial exiles, they were out of time as well as place, the verities of the past now irretrievably marooned. Many simply refused to come back to a ‘home’ they barely knew but travelled on instead, keeping just ahead of the decolonising tide. From India they went to Kenya; from there to Rhodesia or South Africa. Today the sunshine and the servants might remain but they are pleasures to be had behind a razor-wire fence.

That the organisers of this volume decided to keep the story going to the present day adds greatly to its success. However the British Empire ended, historians have increasingly over recent years sought to work *across* the watershed that decolonisation might represent.⁽⁸⁾ In the 21st century, the history of ‘Britons overseas’ is very much alive. But how many men and women setting off to seek their fortunes in Canada or Australia today see themselves as following an essentially *imperial* path? It is better not to dwell on it perhaps – empire no longer holds much pride – but the irony remains: at the end of the imperial line we

return to the start – to the old white dominions, nations in their own right now but popular as ever before as sun-lit destinations for ‘Britons overseas’.⁽⁹⁾

Migration and Empire, co-authored by Stephen Constantine and Marjory Harper, is a very different sort of book. Less social history than a mixture of in-depth demographic, political and economic analysis, this is altogether a denser and more challenging beast. Like the first volume here discussed, however, its appearance is in itself indicative of the state of the historiographical field. Research into imperial migration, of course, is nothing new. Only in the last 15 years, however, has an interest in *movement* – not only of people but of their ideological and material ‘baggage’ as well – developed to a point where it has become an indispensable feature of colonial and postcolonial studies. Central to this agenda is the argument that, as an analytical category, the nation will not do.⁽¹⁰⁾ Much current scholarship on empire, therefore, regardless of whether or not it deals with migration *per se*, is nevertheless animated by a concern to work across the boundaries of the state. As ever, historical interests reflect contemporary trends. Ours is a period of fluidity and flux. In the early 21st century, people migrate in number (and at speeds) unthinkable just 50 years before. Today, half the world’s ‘Europeans’ live outside of Europe; a yet greater proportion of ‘Africans’ outside Africa (p. 338). No wonder that the fixity of national boundaries seems, if not irrelevant, then at least somewhat out of date.

The *reasons* for why Africans and Europeans live outside the continent of their birth, however, are hardly much the same. In one sense, of course, migration reflects a basic universal: people move to improve their lives – or rather, they move in the expectation that lives can be improved. Not all migrants, however, have the luxury of weighing up the pros and cons. For some, departure is the culmination of disaster or despair; for others there simply is no choice. And this is what this book so effectively records – the breadth and range of human lives that – quite literally – *took place* in and around the British imperial world.

Unlike much of the current colonial writing on movement and migration, however, this is a definitively (defiantly?) *empirical* book. There is no talk here of ‘disrupting the colonial archive’ or ‘destabilising tropes’ (this is the *OHBE* after all). Human histories here are embedded in a bed-rock of fact. As prose-style, this can be somewhat unforgiving: percentiles and proportions are not always so conducive for fluency and flow. But, as demographic historians will tell you, numbers can be sexy too and – to the reader who comes prepared – the combination of quantitative and qualitative data that is compounded here will prove enormously rewarding.

The structure of the book combines a regional and thematic approach. The four opening chapters deal with the three major destinations for British migration: Canada, Australia and New Zealand – plus ‘Africa South of the Sahara’. For experts on any of these particular regions, there will be much here that is already known; what is novel is the conceptual framing, the organising lens. The next half-dozen chapters are thematic, dealing with, in order: non-white migration; immigration into Britain; women; children; the emigration business and ‘homecoming’. Crucially, by placing all sorts of different *kinds* of migration between the covers of a single book, what the authors achieve is a study that not only draws meaningful comparative analysis according to those staple criteria of gender, race and class but can also incorporate a host of other variables as well – religion, nationality, culture, work – and very much else besides. While migration provides the thematic ‘way in’, however, it is also offered as something of a ‘grand narrative’ of its own. Whether the authors would agree with Niall Ferguson that the British Empire ‘made’ the modern world is doubtful, but they are certainly in no doubt as to the lasting impact of migration within that empire. The unlocking of natural resources; the development of international trade; the spread of English language and culture – all this was due in no small part to the movement of the British overseas. That many emigrants saw themselves not as migrants at all but as participants in a project of ‘overseas settlement’ is itself instructive: migration implied the movement to foreign lands; settlement, by contrast, meant the populating of a wider *British* world. Their descendants may have come to see themselves not as British but as Canadians, Australians or New Zealanders but this is not to detract from the formative historical significance of these earlier migrant flows.

The new imperial history has been, at least in part, about complicating direction. Movement was not

unilinear. Change was not one way. Nor is the binary model of metropole-periphery sufficient to capture the multifarious, multi-directional movement of people, materials and ideas whose itinerant trails sprawled and stuttered across (and beyond) the British imperial world.⁽¹¹⁾ There are two obvious inflections here. One is the influence of maritime history upon the history of empire; the other is the poststructuralist stress upon the haphazard.⁽¹²⁾ To some extent, we might contend, historians of imperial migration are still ‘writing back’ to J. R. Seeley’s 1883 treatise, *The Expansion of England*, a manifesto for forward motion and a foundational conceit.⁽¹³⁾ But if complexity is what defines migration, what on earth can be said of it that does not detract from that complexity? What can pull together what seems to be, by definition, moving incessantly apart?

What Constantine and Harper show is that while these histories are multitudinous that is not to say that they are disconnected. These migrants are *related*, their passages all conducted within the empire of which they formed a part. So what precisely *are* the connecting threads that bound these lives together?

The answer is politics. And it is this that is at the heart of the book – and distinguishes it most clearly from its companion. As a constituent part of empire, migration was – of course – inescapably reflective of relations of power. The point is made most explicitly in the chapter on non-white migration but it is threaded, with varying degrees of prominence, throughout the book. This is our connecting thread. And – in stimulating discussion and debate – it will prove the book’s most fertile – and hopefully controversial – part. The questions are perennial but no less vital for that. Take race and agency, for example. As the authors put it:

... are [non-European migrants] to be regarded as independent economic actors subject little more than their migrating UK cousins to the tyranny of circumstances and the lure of expectations? Or, should we remember that in colonial societies, with a racial hierarchy, power was even more likely to be unequally distributed and that particular pressures to move might have been created by colonialism? (p. 5)

Grappling with this question is not new. Engaging with it through the subject of migration – and doing so, what is more, with such an effective blending of empirical precision and intellectual rigor – most certainly is. Empire migration, as now becomes clear, was no confusion, complex certainly but intelligible also. To stress the networked, interconnected nature of this movement is not enough; the achievement of this volume is to identify and elaborate upon the *nature* of these supporting struts (what Lonsdale in another context terms ‘the hidden props’). The indentured labourer migrated; so too did the gentleman farmer but their passages did not merely coincide: streams of empire were dynamic and intermeshed; indeed, they needed to be and were deliberately engineered to do so (p. 5). Migration, in other words, was structured. At a point when a Foucault-inspired insistence on the disordered and dispersed has reached something of a saturation point, to insist upon these structures – and, what is more, to reveal them – is welcome indeed.

As a collection of studies each locally framed, *Britons* imparted the texture of the local – the ‘flavour’ of the place. This, by contrast, spans – and unifies – the globe, charting trans-oceanic trajectories, networks, resettlements and flows. ‘Britons’ are people, ‘migration’ a phenomenon. As such, this pair of books represents a neat division between the social and the cultural (*Britons*) and the political and economic (*Migration*). To anybody interested in the history – and historiography – of empire overseas, both should be read and – ideally – together.

Notes

1. Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Colonial categories and the boundaries of rule’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31 (1989), 134–61.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Examples include: Robert Bickers, *Briton in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900–1949* (Manchester, 1999); Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford,

- 2005); Gregor Muller, *Cambodia's Bad Frenchmen: The Rise of French Rule and the Life of Thomas Caraman, 1840–87* (London, 2009); Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and 'White Subalternity' in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Madhavi Kale, *OHBEhave! The Mini-Me version*, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 3, 1 (2002). For a balanced review see Dane Kennedy, 'Oxford's empire', *The International History Review*, 23, 3 (2001).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. On the 'new' imperial history see *The New Imperial Histories Reader*, ed. Stephen Howe, (London, 2009).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. *Australia's Empire*, ed. Deryk Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford, 2008); *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Philip Buckner (Oxford, 2008).[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. N. O. Gist and R. D. Wright, *Marginality and Identity: Anglo-Indians as a Racially-Mixed Minority in India* (Leiden, 1973); C. J. Hawes, *Poor Relations: the Making of a Eurasian Community in British India, 1773–1833* (Richmond, 1996); Satoshi Mizutani. *The British in India and their Domiciled Brethren: Race and Class in the Colonial Context, 1858–1930* (PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2004).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Vivienne de Watteville, *Out in the Blue: Travels in East Africa* (London, 1927).[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. See, for example, the next volume of the *OHBE* companion series: *Britain's Experience of Empire During the Twentieth Century*, ed. Andrew Thompson (Oxford: forthcoming).[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Although the level of annual migration of British nationals out of the UK is lower today than what it was during the colonial period, the cumulative effects of migration over time mean that almost 6 million British nationals are living overseas (roughly 10 per cent of the UK's resident population). A further 58 million people around the world claim British ancestry.[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC, 2003).[Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. Alan Lester, 'Imperial circuits and networks: geographies of the British Empire', *History Compass* 4, 1 (2005); *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (Urbana, IL, 2009).[Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. On maritime history and empire see – most recently – Glenn O'Hara, *Britain and the Sea* (London, 2010); Kit Kandlin, 'The empire of women: transient entrepreneurs in the southern Caribbean, 1790–1820', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 38, 3 (2010).[Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1983).[Back to \(13\)](#)

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