

# Was there a "British" Empire?

## *The Oxford History of the British Empire* from a Canadian Perspective

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Was there a “British” Empire?  
*The Oxford History of the British Empire*  
from a Canadian Perspective

AS LATE AS THE 1960S BRITISH IMPERIAL HISTORY was still studied in a tradition best exemplified in *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, published in nine volumes between 1929 and 1940.<sup>1</sup> The editors of the *Cambridge History* emphasized in the preface to the first volume that the history of the Empire had been a “long story of colonisation and imperial policy, of the rise and growth of new nations and the assumption of vast responsibilities”.<sup>2</sup> The focus of the *Cambridge History* was on the second British Empire – only one of the three general volumes was devoted to the pre-1783 Empire – and on the gradual transformation of the colonies of settlement into self-governing Dominions. India was obviously central to the Imperial story and so was given separate treatment in two volumes. But the history of the rest of what was defined as the “dependent empire” was incorporated in the three general volumes, while each of the Dominions – Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa – was given a separate volume of its own. The volumes on the Dominions were all collaborative efforts involving scholars from the Dominions and reflecting the belief that the British Commonwealth was a partnership of Britons at home and Britons abroad. Indeed, Sir Charles Lucas declared that “If anything absolutely new can be traced to the possession of our Empire, it must be traced to the most original feature in it, the progressive development of dependencies into independent partner nations which have nevertheless remained by the mother country’s side and under the same sovereign”. Somewhat overoptimistically in retrospect, he proclaimed that “the life of Great Britain as a nation is now, as it was not formerly, conditioned by its partnership” with the Dominions.<sup>3</sup> This argument was especially appealing to Canadian scholars who believed that it had been “the protracted ferment in both the Canadas, the strenuous efforts of reformers in Nova Scotia, and the unanswerable arguments of Lord Durham” which had forced Imperial statesmen to follow “the true line of advance” after the American Revolution and to concede to the colonies of settlement in the second British Empire self-government through the device of responsible government. W.P.M. Kennedy proudly proclaimed that the transformation of the British Empire into the British Commonwealth had resulted “largely from the bold progressiveness of Canadian statesmen”.<sup>4</sup>

The new five-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire*, over 3,000 pages in length and divided into nearly 150 chapters, is the first multi-authored, multi-volume history since the *Cambridge History* and it shows how completely the scholarly study

1 I have borrowed (but modified) the title of this article from Ged Martin’s stimulating “Was there a British Empire?”, *Historical Journal*, 15 (1972), pp. 562-9.

2 Preface to volume one of *The Cambridge History of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1929), p. v.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-1.

4 *Ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. v-vi.

of imperial history has altered.<sup>5</sup> There are a host of ways in which the *Oxford History* differs from the *Cambridge* but three seem to me to be of particular importance. First, the assumption that there was something distinctive about the British Empire has been largely abandoned. The British Empire appears different from the other European Empires only in its size and longevity. It is seen not as a liberal and progressive force implanting British parliamentary institutions around the globe, but as the expression of a typically rapacious European power extending economic and political control, both formal and informal, over the less developed parts of the world. In volume one N.A.M. Rodgers declares that “If empire, as Francis Xavier said, was little more than ‘to conjugate the verb to rob in all its moods and tenses’,” the English were the “purest of imperialists” (I, pp. 96-7). Very early in its history, Nicholas Canny declares, the empire came to be justified in Britain on the basis of “its contribution to the economic well being” of the mother country and religious and other motivations were clearly subordinated to the material (I, p. 22). This theme runs through all four of the narrative volumes of the *Oxford History*. I do not mean to imply that the authors fall into some simple economic reductionist theory. They recognize that imperial expansion from the 17th to the 20th century was driven by a host of economic and non-economic factors – by European rivalries, by missionary enthusiasm, by a desire to find an outlet for Britain’s rapidly growing population, by scientific curiosity and technological imperatives, by military calculations and needs, and sometimes by simple accident. Nonetheless, one comes away from the *Oxford History* with the impression that the Empire was essentially an instrument for adding to the wealth of Great Britain.

The question of how much of a benefit – or a liability – the Empire actually was is specifically dealt with in several chapters. In volume two Patrick K. O’Brien challenges the argument that the first Empire “made only a small contribution to the rise of the first industrial nation” (II, p. 75) and Jacob Price concludes that, at the very least, the demand created by the overseas empire hastened the technological transformation of several long-established branches of British industrial life (II, p. 99). In volume three Avner Offer dismisses as unlikely the frequently heard argument that the Empire was a diversion “from a more productive development path” in which more equipment and talent would have been invested in the domestic economy (III, p. 708). In volume four D.K. Fieldhouse concludes that “it remains quite unclear how Britain might have prospered without her Imperial crutches after 1914” (IV, pp. 112-13). On balance then the Empire is seen as a positive force in the development of the British economy and a benefit to Britain.

The second major theme of the *Oxford History* is the extent to which the British Empire interacted with and affected the lives of the various non-British peoples who were brought under British rule. In the *Cambridge History* the British Empire was

5 The five volumes are: Nicholas Canny, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume I: The Origins of Empire* (Oxford, 1998); P.J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998); Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999); Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999); Robin W. Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume V: Historiography* (Oxford, 1999). All page references in the text are to this source.

seen as at worst a benign, and usually a beneficial force promoting good government and modernization around the globe. In the first British Empire, which was concentrated in North America, the British saw themselves “as a commercial and agricultural rather than conquering people” (I, p. 37). They stressed the “peaceful origins” of their Empire (I, p. 51). Even during the 19th century they saw themselves as reluctant imperialists responding to turbulent frontiers and ultimately as a force bringing positive good to the areas of the world which were reluctantly added to the Empire. These hoary myths are now firmly laid to rest. Here too the *Oxford History* is very balanced. It rejects the myth that the English were inherently more racist than other Europeans. The first Englishmen to have “direct dealings with Amerindians” were, Nicholas Canny insists, “sympathetic towards Native Americans and their culture” and they “made as genuine an effort as any Europeans to overcome their inherited beliefs and prejudices and accommodate America and its peoples within their world view” (I, pp. 152-3). But the British ultimately posed a greater threat to the Native Americans because they came in substantially larger numbers than other Europeans and they were “concerned with securing rights not over peoples but over land” (I, p. 37).

One of the great strengths of the *Oxford History*, one of the many ways in which it is far superior to the *Cambridge History*, is that it treats the Native Americans not merely as victims but as historical actors interacting with the British. The Native Americans were not, Peter C. Mansell point out, “meek witnesses to European colonization”; some resisted the European invaders, others sought to negotiate with the newcomers, “creating commercial and diplomatic alliances that preserved much of their world” (I, p. 346). During the first half of the 18th century the surviving Amerindian groups in and around the Thirteen Colonies “secured fragile places in a global imperial system” (II, p. 347), but they were again caught up in the wars between France, Britain and America which shook the continent between the Seven Years War and the War of 1812-14, when the British abandoned their Indian allies and left them “to make the best terms they could with the United States” (II, p. 369). In the 19th century the Native peoples in Canada, the Aborigines in Australia and the Maoris in New Zealand, despite the so-called doctrine of imperial trusteeship, were similarly forced to make the best terms they could with the British settlers in those colonies, though their story is not told nearly so effectively in the *Oxford History*, buried as it is as a very minor sub-theme in the brief chapters on 19th- and 20th-century Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

In other respects too the *Oxford History* presents a more critical picture of the British record. The *Cambridge History* pointed with pride to Britain being one of the first nations to abolish the slave trade and slavery, ignoring evidence that the British had carried more slaves across the Atlantic than any other power and that nowhere had conditions for slaves been harsher than in the British West Indies. The *Oxford History* presents a truer picture. David Richardson stresses the harmful effect of the trade “on the social and political fabric of Africa” during the century and a half when the British dominated the trade (II, p. 463). The majority of Blacks “lived short and impoverished lives, worked most of the time, created fragile families, encountered great brutality”, but Philip D. Morgan warns against painting “a monochrome caricature” of the Black experience (II, p. 485). Blacks also resisted “the dehumanization inherent in their status”, sometimes by rebellion or by “flight, sabotage, and individual murders”. The

greatest act of resistance was the creation of “a distinctive language, music, and religion – in short, a culture” – though this had the ambiguous result of encouraging accommodation to the established order (II, p. 483). In the end it was humanitarian pressure which led to the abolition of the slave trade but, as J.R. Ward points out, by this time the British no longer believed “that they were making a significant economic sacrifice” (II, p. 428). Similarly, as Andrew Porter argues, the pressure to abolish slavery may have come from the humanitarians but until they were able to add “a ‘capitalist’ argument” to their armory, emancipation was unlikely (III, p. 204).

During the 19th century the British gradually brought under imperial rule ever larger numbers of non-British peoples. In India but also elsewhere in Asia and Africa the indigenous populations were so large or so powerful that they could not simply be ignored and shoved aside. The British were therefore forced to find collaborators from among the native rulers and/or elites and frequently they were also forced to adjust imperial policies to avoid widespread resistance from those they had brought under imperial rule. Once again the *Oxford History* insists on the wide variety of responses of non-British peoples to the expansion of Empire: from collaboration to various forms of resistance, both active and passive. Colonial Indian history, D.A. Washbrook points out, can not “be reduced to a simple dialectic of domination and resistance” (III, p. 397). Similarly, the “cultural encounters between Briton and African during the late-19th-century conquest, even where violence was involved, were on both sides”, according to T.C. McCaskie, “matters of probing negotiation towards the equilibrium of a changed order rather than permanently binding choices between strategies of outright collaboration or resistance” (III, p. 679). In the 20th century the British increasingly sought their collaborators from among the more reactionary elements in Africa and Asia and, through the policy of indirect rule, sought to “slow and control the pace of change”, a policy which John Cell condemns as “inefficient and unprogressive” and ultimately unsuccessful (IV, pp. 251, 242).

The Colonial Office occasionally interfered to prevent the abuse of power in colonies with substantial European minorities, but only after World War Two did it begin to play a really active role in trying to provide better educational facilities and social services in the so-called dependent empire. Increasingly the main concern of British officials was to provide the infrastructure for the creation of a viable independent state so that they could leave with dignity. Yet, as B.R. Tomlinson points out, despite the rhetoric of imperial trusteeship, “British rule did not leave a substantial legacy of wealth, health, or happiness to the majority” of their ex-colonial territories in Asia and Africa (IV, p. 375).

A third major difference between the *Cambridge* and the *Oxford History* is in their attitude toward those who resided at the heart of the Empire. The *Cambridge History* took as a given that the British people – itself a problematic construct for much of this period – were born to the purple, born to acquire a vast and extensive empire. The *Oxford History* stresses the slow growth of the Empire and the complex impact that its acquisition had on British culture. Jane Ohlmeyer argues that even before they had an empire, the English had developed “ethnocentric mentalities” as they established their control over Ireland and over the Borders, the Highlands and the Islands (I, p. 147). Indeed, until the 1630s, Nicholas Canny asserts, “the English plantations in America hardly impinged upon the consciousness of most English people” (I, p. 164). Ireland – consistently treated in the *Oxford History* not as part of the United Kingdom,

even when it was, but as the first British colony – remained of greater interest and attracted more English migration and investment. Gradually the number of migrants increased, as more and more men and women sought to be participants “in a rich and expansive transatlantic world” (I, p. 191) and slowly the British did begin to evolve a “comprehensive imperial ideology” (I, p. 113). By the 1760s, Peter J. Marshall concludes, there had developed “a deep national commitment to Empire as an integral part of Britain’s power and standing in the world and of British people’s sense of who they were” (II, p. 26).

This commitment survived the loss of the Thirteen Colonies, but it was always contested terrain. In the 19th century, the Empire was “a constant source of celebration and self-regard – as well as anxiety –” to the British, one which “produced much cultural common ground” but which also “stimulated intense controversy” (III, p. 292). A number of the authors seem concerned to show that the Empire was never as popular as it appeared. Ronald Hyam indicates that it was not popular in the Edwardian era, though his evidence is drawn largely from a few anecdotal comments made by Colonial Office officials and disillusioned ex-governors. In volume four a whole chapter is devoted to “Critics of Empire in Britain” in the 20th century and Nicholas Owen describes “most workers” as “indifferent or apathetic to questions of Empire” (IV, p. 198), despite his own evidence seeming to contradict this conclusion. It is also contradicted by John Mackenzie who talks about an “Indian Summer in the popular culture of Empire” (IV, p. 229). Mackenzie notes that “one of the curiosities of British Imperial history” appears to be that “when the Empire encountered the economic, political, and constitutional crises that would ultimately bring it down, British domestic culture came to emphasize colonial relationships as never before” (IV, p. 230).

Now I have no quarrel with these themes per se. They are a necessary corrective to the romanticized, triumphalist, Whiggish version of Imperial History embodied in the *Cambridge History* and I have little sympathy with those who do not like the *Oxford History* because its authors adopted a far more critical and less sympathetic view of the legacies of Empire than they wanted. Ironically the editors of the *Oxford History* are also likely to be attacked by proponents of colonial discourse theory for not being critical enough of the British record and for being too traditional in their approach.<sup>6</sup> It is undoubtedly true that most of those involved in the writing of the *Oxford History* were fairly traditional historians. But if one takes that as a given, what they have produced in a relatively short period of time is a survey which is breathtaking in its sweep and which effectively incorporates the scholarship of a whole generation of imperial historians. There are a few topics which one might like to have seen explored in greater depth. The most obvious weakness is in the treatment of gender issues. The

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Dane Kennedy, “The Boundaries of Oxford’s Empire”, *International History Review*, 23, 3 (September 2001), pp. 604-22. Not surprisingly, Kennedy, who believes area studies are no longer especially useful, has limited sympathy with my argument. Kennedy chaired the Round Table panel on the *Oxford History* held at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in January 2000 at which I presented a draft of this paper. For an approach somewhat closer to my own, see Andrew Thompson, “Is Humpty Dumpty Together Again?”, *Twentieth Century British History*, 12, 4 (2001), pp. 9-23. I am grateful to both Kennedy and Thompson for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.



only volume to contain a chapter specifically on “Gender in the British Empire” is the 20th-century volume. In volume five on “Historiography” Diana Wylie had to incorporate gender into a chapter on “Disease, Diet and Gender” (an interesting combination). Actually the volume on historiography is a rather strange beast. It contains a discussion of several topics, such as that on “Architecture in the British Empire”, which are not really historiographical articles at all, but discussions of topics which somehow got left out or received insufficient attention in the earlier volumes. But this is a minor criticism. At least they are there and what the *Oxford History* does, it does very well indeed.

My criticism is of a rather different nature. I would not deny that the *Cambridge History* placed far too much emphasis on the significance of the Dominions and that it was necessary to broaden out the story to include the whole Empire. Nor would I deny the need to move beyond constitutional history and to focus on the interaction between the British and the non-British peoples brought under imperial control. But revisionism always carries with it the danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater and I would argue that that is what the *Oxford History* has done. In its desire to move away from constitutional issues, to focus on the impact of European expansion in Africa and Asia, and to incorporate into the story those parts of the world sometimes described as part of Britain’s “informal empire”, something important has been lost sight of. That something is the critical significance to the British imperial experience of the colonies of settlement. The *Cambridge History* took as a given that there were two empires, an empire of British settlement which had by 1940 evolved into a series of “partner nations”, and a “dependent empire”. The latter consisted of territories in which indigenous peoples would forever form the majority. The former consisted of a small club (at this stage including Ireland and South Africa as well as Canada, Australia and New Zealand), which alongside Britain formed the inner, privileged core – the “British” component – of the larger British Empire. This division is implicitly rejected by the editors and authors of the *Oxford History*. Indeed, there seems to be a deliberate attempt to play down the significance of the “British” component in the British Empire.

Actually this criticism does not really apply to the two volumes dealing with the pre-1783 Empire. How could it since the heart of the first empire was the American colonies? As Nicholas Canny notes, the British Empire was “distinctive . . . within the spectrum of European overseas Empires” during the 17th and 18th centuries because of “the prominent place enjoyed by colonies of white settlement within it” (I, p. 15). The first two volumes of the *Oxford History* are very much an Anglo-American collaborative effort. Out of nine volumes the *Cambridge History* devoted one general volume to the period before 1783 and a few chapters in some of the other nine volumes. The *Oxford History* gives almost equal weight to the first and second British Empires (though admittedly the two volumes devoted to the second empire are substantially longer than the two volumes devoted to the first). This means inevitably that the first two volumes can cover their topics in far greater detail and with far greater sophistication than the writers in the later volumes when the Empire was so much larger. In volume one, seven of the 21 chapters focus primarily (and several others partly) on the British side of the Atlantic and two additional chapters are devoted to Ireland. Every conceivable theme is covered and there is even room for a chapter on “The Emerging Empire: The Continental Perspective, 1650-1713”, which

examines Britain's European rivals in the 17th century. Although one chapter is devoted to the Caribbean (which might be seen as a considerable underemphasis), one to the British "in" Western Africa (which, as even the author admits, on I, pp. 260-1, can hardly be seen as part of the Empire since the British presence consisted simply of a series of transient trading posts), and one to the British "in" Asia, most of the remaining chapters focus on the plantations in America. The areas in North America occupied by British colonists in the 17th century were very small in extent and grew very slowly. Even in 1700 European settlement had barely begun to move into the interior of the continent and both the Chesapeake and New England each included only around 90,000 Europeans, while the Middle Colonies held fewer than half that number and the Carolinas probably fewer than 15,000. Nonetheless, each of these four regions is the subject of a separate chapter and the authors are able to produce detailed and sophisticated portraits of imperial expansion in these regions. Even at this early stage, before Scotland became part of the United Kingdom, the growing diversity of population meant that "the adjective 'English' was no longer adequate to describe the emerging Empire and 'British' came gradually to be accepted as a more serviceable term" (I, p. 24). Indeed, the Irish, the Scots and the Welsh overseas quickly learned that the "the readiest means of procuring for themselves the customary or putative rights of Englishmen was to insist that they were British". This insistence, Nicholas Canny argues, "explains the alacrity with which ordinary white settlers in almost all the Atlantic colonies took up arms to defend their rights" and their reaction to the Glorious Revolution, which "demonstrated the existence of a British Empire whose inhabitants shared political assumptions as well as economic interests" (I, p. 25). A "British" Empire was already coming into existence.

These themes are further developed in the volume on The Eighteenth Century. Considerable attention is still paid to developments in Britain, two chapters are devoted to the West Indies, two to the slave trade and slavery, two to events in Asia, and even one to the Pacific. But inevitably the core of the volume focuses on the American colonies and the American Revolution. This was a period of rapid demographic growth in British America, fuelled partly by immigration. In the 17th century about 400,000 migrants crossed the Atlantic to America, about 350,000 of them from England and Wales. In the 18th century, the number of English declined to under 100,000 while the number of Irish increased to 115,000 and of Scots to 75,000 (II, pp. 30-1). They were joined by large numbers of German-speaking peoples, as well as smaller numbers from other parts of Europe. "All along the expanding frontier", James Horn notes, "Irish, German, Swiss, Highland Scots, English, and Welsh settlers, together with African slaves and local Indian tribes, evolved as locally distinct societies, where ethnic diversity and the continual movement of people in and out were taken for granted" (II, p. 90).

This may have been true along the frontier, but as volume two shows, the British still formed the dominant group and they determined the social and political culture of the Thirteen Colonies. Jack Greene points out that the long series of wars between 1689 and 1815 helped to create a stronger sense of British national identity in Britain. Although in Britain this identity may have rested in large part on a shared Protestantism among the Irish, the Welsh and the Scots, this association was not such a decisive element in shaping colonial British identities (except perhaps in New England). But other presumed British characteristics, Greene insists, could be and



were transferred to the Thirteen Colonies. Particularly important was the belief that “liberty was the most important ingredient of an Imperial identity in Britain and the British Empire”, a belief that was still a component of the overseas British identity in the 19th and 20th centuries (II, pp. 228-30). Over time there was a growing divide between how the British elite at home and the British elites overseas defined their British-ness. Even in Britain the terms “‘Britons’ and ‘Britannia’ emerged as symbols of a patriotism less focused on the monarch than earlier”; in the colonies, Ian Steele notes, there was an even clearer distinction between “the symbolically useful monarch” and the ministers of the crown (a distinction critical to what later became known as responsible government) (II, pp. 114-15). The Empire was able to function, despite friction between the centre and the periphery, primarily because the Imperial government left political, economic and social control within the colonies in the hands of “the British communities of the Atlantic Empire” (II, p. 126). From this perspective the American Revolution was indeed a civil war (which was how contemporaries viewed it) between two branches of an extended British family, who could not agree on how to reconcile the supremacy of the Imperial Parliament with the demands for internal self-government in the “British” colonies overseas. This interpretation will not satisfy all American colonial historians, especially those who see the revolution as rooted in social conflict in the colonies. Ironically it would have satisfied the authors of the *Cambridge History* and an earlier generation of Canadian historians who saw the rupture between Britain and the Thirteen Colonies as a constitutional crisis which developed because of a failure on the part of the Imperial authorities to accept that the British colonies overseas must be allowed to run their own internal affairs and that the Empire must involve into a federation of equals (or at least near equals).

Unfortunately modern-day Canadian historians are not much interested in these constitutional issues. They will, nonetheless, be disappointed in the slight attention paid to what would become Canada in the first two volumes of the *Oxford History*. Both volumes were written by American and British scholars whose interest in and knowledge of Canada was extremely limited. Of the 44 authors involved only Ian K. Steele is based in Canada and has written extensively on Canadian history. Thus the Canadian aspects of the American story tend to be overlooked or underemphasized. Take for example the almost total lack of interest in the history of Newfoundland, which has always claimed to be Britain’s oldest colony and which certainly in the 17th and 18th centuries was more important to Britain in strategic and economic terms than a number of the Thirteen Colonies. There are a few passing references to the colony but no systematic discussion of the Island’s importance to the Empire, an importance so great that the negotiations with France leading to the Treaty of Paris in 1763 almost broke down over the issue of fishing rights off Newfoundland. Nor is there any real discussion of the important links between Newfoundland and the West of England and Ireland and the unique pattern of settlement that resulted from these linkages. And the Beothuks, one of the first Amerindian groups to have sustained contact with the English and one of the first to disappear, might as well never have existed as far as the *Oxford History* is concerned. Similarly, while a whole chapter in volume one is devoted to the Royal African Company’s limited and transient impact upon West Africa, only a few passing references are made in volumes one to three to the Hudson’s Bay Company, which ultimately secured British possession over an enormous part of the North America continent and dramatically affected the lives of

the native peoples of North America.

The mainland colonies in what became Canada could not be so easily ignored. But readers of the *Oxford History* will not learn of the failed attempt to create a New Scotland in the 17th century in what would later become Nova Scotia. They will not understand from the few oblique references why Nova Scotia was the site of continual conflict between rival Empires in the 17th century, conflicts which led in the 18th century to the decision of the French to build the largest military base in the New World and to the expulsion of the Acadians. The latter – surely one of the most brutal acts in imperial history and the subject of a very substantial literature – is dealt with in passing in two brief references. One reason for the expulsion was that the British had long been engaged in a prolonged war with the Micmacs of Nova Scotia, but the readers of the *Oxford History* will not learn this because they will not know the Micmacs existed. On the map on page 355 of volume two on “Indian Peoples and European Colonies in the Mid-Eighteenth Century” the Micmacs are left out and there is no indication that they still controlled large parts of Nova Scotia. In the article on “The British North American Empire” in volume five of the *Oxford History*, which deals with historiography, Stephen Foster declares that “beginning in 1927 with *New England’s Outpost*, John Bartlett Brebner at Columbia University made colonial history a little more imperial by bringing the Maritimes into the study of the subject. They have retained a toehold ever since, if only because Nova Scotia remains a useful counter-example when explaining why the other thirteen colonies chose revolution” (V, pp. 80-1). (Actually there were 14 other mainland colonies since Quebec by this stage was also part of the Empire.) I fear it was not much of a toehold since Nova Scotia’s reaction to the American Revolution is discussed in two lines in volume three (p. 380) and the issues raised by Brebner, Bumsted, Rawlyk and Reid, all of whom are cited by Foster in a footnote, are ignored. There is a reference in Peter Marshall’s bibliography to the recent pre-Confederation history of Atlantic Canada, which focuses heavily on imperial issues, but little evidence of its use by any of the contributors.<sup>7</sup> But then, as Foster points out, Brebner was “Canadian by birth and earlier education, as for the most part were those who succeeded in his interests” (V, p. 81).

Quebec fares a little better than Nova Scotia but Canadian historians will be disappointed with the brief and superficial discussion of the impact and long-term implications of the Conquest, the most important event in Canadian history and surely one of the most important in British imperial history. Canadian historians will also be astonished by how little attention is paid to the Loyalists in the Thirteen Colonies. Even their numbers are minimized and there is only the briefest discussion of their re-settlement in what was left of the British Empire in North America after 1783. Canadian historians will be astonished but hardly surprised since American historians – and apparently present-day Imperial historians also – have never been much interested in the losers. The bitter divisions among the Loyalists who migrated to British North America are glossed over and the issue of the long-term contribution of Loyalist ideology to the formation of a distinctive Canadian identity ignored. Indian

<sup>7</sup> See Phillip A. Buckner and John G. Reid, eds., *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Toronto, 1994).

Loyalists fare somewhat better and considerable attention is paid to their role in the wars between Britain and the Americans between 1774 and 1815, though thereafter the complex reactions of the native peoples of Canada to the extension of imperial authority are dealt with very briefly and superficially. In effect, they have been dispossessed both of their land and of their place in imperial history. The Black loyalists fare worst of all. Their role in founding both Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone is ignored.

A few years ago I heard a prominent American historian begin a paper by saying: "After the British lost their empire in North America in 1783 . . ."! One might almost believe this from reading the *Oxford History*. After 1783 it was not necessarily inevitable that America would expand across the continent to occupy the territorial limits that it does today and completely dominate the North American continent. But the *Oxford History* is written as if it were. There is no real discussion of the efforts of the British to prevent American expansion over the half century after 1783, either in volume two or volume three, and so the significance of the British North American Colonies and the importance of Canada to the Empire is marginalized.

In the 19th- and 20th-century volumes Canada is relegated to the sidelines as a minor player. The comparison with the treatment given to the small British colonies in North America in the 17th-century volume reveals a ludicrous disparity. In 1800 the British North American colonies were already much larger in extent and contained more than twice the population of the American colonies in 1700 but they are given only one chapter in the 18th-century volume compared to the four given to the American colonies in the earlier volume. But Peter Marshall, who wrote the chapter on "British North America, 1760-1815", had a manageable task compared to the authors of the later volumes.<sup>8</sup> During the 19th century, Canada would spread across the continent to become the world's second largest country and by 1914 it had a population of around eight million. Yet Ged Martin was given the same amount of space to write about Canada from 1815-1914 as each of the four authors dealing with early settlement in the Thirteen Colonies. Is it surprising that the chapters in volume one are splendid overviews while Martin's chapter inevitably has the feel of being a once over lightly account? In the 20th -century volume, the chapter on Canada is actually more satisfying because David Mackenzie abandons the effort to write a comprehensive history of Canada in favour of a more limited study of "Canada, the North Atlantic Triangle and the Empire".

I do not want to be misunderstood here. When I gave an earlier version of this paper at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, the immediate assumption of the other panelists and (I suspect of the American audience) was that I was simply a parochial Canadian historian selfishly demanding that greater attention be paid to Canada. To an extent that may be true but I think it is legitimate to query the inherent imbalance that exists in the *Oxford History*. American history is privileged, perhaps reflecting the generous subsidies Americans gave to the project. American scholars and American scholarship were fully incorporated into the project as Dominions scholars and scholarship were in the *Cambridge History* but are not in

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps to avoid confusion, it should be pointed out that Peter J. Marshall and Peter Marshall are different people.

the *Oxford History*. I say Dominions because what is true of Canadian history is also true of Australian and New Zealand history.

Volumes one and two of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* were an Anglo-American collaborative effort. Volumes three and four are largely a British enterprise. Of the 26 contributors in volume three, 20 received their doctorates from Oxford, Cambridge or London (and one from Aberdeen). Of the 28 contributors in volume four, 20 did their graduate training in Oxford, Cambridge or London (and one in St. Andrews). The dominance of Oxford is especially noticeable, even if not particularly surprising. John MacKenzie, who contributes a chapter to both volumes, completed his Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia, but I do not think he considers himself a Canadian and he is not based in Canada. Peter Burroughs taught Imperial history for many years at Dalhousie and Ged Martin has written extensively on Canada, but as Doug Owrarn points out they are Canadian neither by birth nor by adoption (V, p. 158). Robert Kubicek teaches at the University of British Columbia, but his primary research interest has never been in Canadian history. Only David MacKenzie in volume four and Doug Owrarn in volume five are historians educated in, based in and primarily interested in Canada. Indeed, most of the academics involved in the preparation of volumes three and four of the *Oxford History* trained in Britain and have spent all or most of their academic careers in Britain. They frequently present papers to each other at the imperial history seminars in Oxford, Cambridge and London, and regularly contribute articles and reviews to the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*. This British dominance had some advantages. Part of the strength of volumes three and four in the *Oxford History* derives from the fact that they are the product of a group of scholars well aware of each other's work and with a very similar set of beliefs about how imperial history should be written, even if they disagree over some of the details. But it is hardly surprising that this core of scholars, overwhelmingly trained and based in Britain, view the Empire very much from a metropolitan perspective. I do not know how many of them studied under Robinson or Gallagher but, as Roger Louis indicates in his chapter on Imperial historiography in volume five, Robinson and Gallagher were clearly the dominant influence on this generation of British-trained and largely British-based imperial historians. By challenging the assumption that imperial expansion was driven solely by events within Europe and insisting that the history of British Imperialism must be seen as an interaction between the British and indigenous peoples (V, p. 40), Robinson and Gallagher had a decisive and very positive impact on the way in which imperial history was and is written. But in two other respects their influence was more questionable, perhaps even pernicious.

It was Vincent Harlow who originally suggested that after the Seven Years' War there was a shift in the Empire's centre of gravity to the East, but it was Robinson and Gallagher who shifted the attention of Imperial historians towards Africa and Asia in the 19th century. In his epilogue to the volume on the 18th century Peter Marshall argues that Harlow may have placed the shift to the East too early but that clearly the 19th-century British Empire had become "predominantly an eastern one" (II, p. 591). Andrew Porter picks up this theme in his introduction to volume three. I accept that there is a case for this argument. But I do not think it is as clear-cut as they imply, because I am far from certain that the question of an Eastern and a Western Empire is the real issue. The more important division, it seems to me, is between the colonies of

settlement where the indigenous peoples were dispossessed and the British (or at least Europeans) came to form a majority of the population and those in which the indigenous people, though temporarily brought under imperial rule, continued to form the majority of the population and would eventually regain control of the colonial state. The former were part of what can be called the “British” Empire; the latter merely possessions of it. This was a division which was institutionalized constitutionally in the 19th century and which was critical to the way the British thought about their empire. Australia and New Zealand may have been in the East but they were part of the “British” Empire. South Africa’s position was more ambiguous, but while it may have been part of Africa, at least until well into the 20th century it was seen as part of the “British” Empire. It was to the “British” Empire that British emigrants flowed in the 19th and the 20th century. Indeed, Avner Offer makes the point that it was “the overseas English-speaking societies” which were the major benefit of empire to the British people since they opened up opportunities to British migrants which otherwise would have been denied them (III, pp. 709-10). If one looks at periodicals or at the popular press, the amount of attention given to the “British” colonies always far outweighed the attention given to the colonies in Africa and Asia, except during brief periods of crisis like the Indian Rebellion of 1857. It was events in Canada which created the most problems for successive British governments from the 1830s to the 1860s and preoccupied British colonial and foreign secretaries, though you will not learn this from reading the *Oxford History*. Even in economic terms the Dominions were more significant collectively, if not individually, to Britain than any other part of the Empire, including India, and they would become more so in the 20th century.

Head-counting may lead one to conclude that the British Empire was based in Asia and Africa by the end of the 19th century, but the British did not count all heads as equal. Indeed, one of the critical weaknesses of the *Oxford History* is that it never confronts head-on the fundamental racism embodied in the British Empire. As Barbara Rush points out in *Imperialism, Race and Resistance*, racism grew stronger in the early 20th century when the idea of “a white, imperial diaspora . . . was energetically promoted”. White settlers, she argues, shared “a diasporic consciousness, a common identity based on ‘Anglo-Saxon’ cultural roots, racial superiority and a sense of ‘home’ as the imperial center”.<sup>9</sup> Bush is concerned with white, settler communities in Africa, but her comments apply also to the parts of the British diaspora established in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In these parts of Greater Britain, having a white skin and British cultural roots (for those of Celtic origins overseas were as much part of the dominant group as those with Anglo-Saxon cultural roots) automatically gave one a privileged position both in the colony and in the “mother country”. In practice Canada pursued an immigration policy virtually as exclusive as the better known White Australia policy and in their attitudes towards indigenous peoples the differences between the two countries were not nearly as great as Canadians like to believe. Until the 1950s (even after the independence of India) the British Commonwealth was essentially a white man’s club, based on an historic

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Rush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Imperialism, Race, and Africa* (London, 1999), p. 4.

alliance between the British at home and the British overseas. The *Cambridge History* was based upon the assumption that this was a good thing, a perspective which only a very few now share, but at least it recognized the powerful appeal of what Canadian historian Doug Cole years ago described as “the crimson thread of kinship”. Unfortunately Doug Cole’s articles are today rarely read either by Imperial historians or by Canadian historians.<sup>10</sup>

There is a second way in which Robinson and Gallagher shaped, and in my mind seriously distorted, our study of British Imperial history. They popularized the concept of “informal empire”. This has always been a controversial concept. Andrew Porter admits that it is very difficult to define the criteria which determine whether a country or a region should or should not be included within Britain’s so-called informal empire, but he still accepts – rather reluctantly one senses – that there was an “intermediate category” of territories “best described as part of a British ‘informal empire’” (III, pp. 8-9). Yet none of the chapters in volume three which deal with the concept of an informal empire give a convincing justification for this position. In “British Policy, Trade and Informal Empire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century” Martin Lynn is basically critical of the concept. Latin America is usually seen as the classic example of British “informal empire”, but Alan Knight admits in the chapter on “Britain and Latin America” that “Whether economic imbalance or cultural dependency qualify as ‘imperialism’ is a moot theoretical point” (III, p. 125). Although he believes in the utility of the concept, Knight’s chapter could as easily be used to prove its essential disutility. Knight does not, for example, give any clear justification for including much of South America in the British informal empire but excluding Mexico where British consuls also frequently interfered in domestic politics to protect British interests (see III, p. 132). And even if large “swathes” of the economies of the various Latin American economies came under of the control of British investors, can the British enclaves in Latin America really be compared with the powerful British settler communities, even the numerically small ones, in all of the colonies which were part of the formal Empire? Knight admits they can not (see III, pp. 140-3). He also admits that it is impossible to distinguish what constitutes British rather than simply more broadly European influences in Latin America. In his chapter on “Britain and China” Jurgen Osterhammel is no more convincing. He does attempt a definition of what constitutes an informal empire – interestingly one which would rule out virtually all of Latin America (see III, pp. 148-9) – but he admits the questionable use of the term when applied to mainland China and the difficulty of isolating “the specifically British element” from that of the other powers involved in the subjugation of China (III, p. 165).

What is problematic for the 19th century becomes increasingly absurd in the 20th. The editor of volume four, Roger Louis, admits that “in the twentieth century the hegemonic influence in Latin America was the United States” (IV, p. 40), but the volume still includes a chapter on Latin America, in which Alan Knight shows that the so-called “informal empire” in Latin America had come to an end well before the

10 Douglas Cole, “The Crimson Thread of Kinship: Ethnic Ideas in Australia, 1870-1914”, *Historical Studies*, 14, 6 (April 1971), pp. 511-25 and “The Problem of Nationalism and Imperialism in British Settlement Colonies”, *Journal of British Studies*, 10, 2 (May 1971), pp. 160-82.



Second World War, even in Argentina, where British investments were increasingly concentrated. Jorgen Osterhammel argues that although America was rapidly emerging as the dominant power in China, “it would be an exaggeration to speak of an American informal empire”, although his reasons for a distinction of this kind are less than convincing (IV, p. 644). The chapter on China in the 20th century seems more concerned with Britain’s diplomatic relations with the mainland government than with Hong Kong, which several hundred Canadians died defending in the Second World War – precisely because it was part of the formal Empire.

Perhaps I am just being a parochial Canadian nationalist. But it does seem to me that a history of the 19th- and 20th-century Empire suffers from a lack of geographical balance when as much attention is given to Latin America and to China as to Canada and more attention to Siam which was not part of the Empire than to the colony of Newfoundland, which is dealt with in a few passing references. Call me old-fashioned but I still believe that a history of the British Empire should focus on the parts of the World which were part of the Empire rather than the parts that were not. I guess one should be grateful. At least there is a whole chapter devoted to Canada in both the third and fourth volumes of the *Oxford History*, whereas in the third volume Australia becomes part of the Western Pacific and New Zealand just another of the Southern Islands, and in the fourth volume the history of “Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands” is summed up in one, brief chapter.

The “informal empire” concept is pernicious for another reason. It implies that there is a continuum from colonies where Britain exercised full and effective sovereignty to wholly independent states. From this perspective those settler colonies which demanded and ultimately received the right to govern themselves were obviously suffering from some form of retarded intellectual development since they did not want to move further along the spectrum “towards decolonisation and full nationhood”. The British settlers are presented as “ideal prefabricated collaborators”,<sup>11</sup> little different from collaborators elsewhere in the Empire. Responsible government is seen not as a measure devised by the British colonists overseas to give them control over their own affairs (as the authors of the *Cambridge History* believed) but simply as another tool which could be used by the Imperial Government for securing collaboration. Thus in the *Oxford History* the whole question of the definition and extension of the system of responsible government in British North America is relegated to a page in Peter Boroughs’ sweeping survey of the “Institutions of Empire” and to two pages in Ged Martin’s “Canada from 1815”. Nehru knew more about the rebellions of 1837 in the Canadas and the Durham Report than anyone will learn from reading the *Oxford History* but then perhaps he read the *Cambridge History*. He certainly read the Durham Report, as did generations of colonial politicians. Yet there is no real discussion in the *Oxford History* of Durham’s mission nor of the historiographical debate over the influence of his famous report, although it remains probably the most widely circulated, widely read and influential document in British Imperial history. Poor Robert Baldwin, one of the great heroes of the struggle for responsible government in the *Cambridge History*, does not even

11 The quote is from Ronald Robinson but is used approvingly by Ged Martin on III, p. 522.

rate a separate reference in the index of the *Oxford History*!<sup>12</sup> Damn clever those Brits for coming up with a device which ensured colonial collaboration at a minimum of cost and persuading the colonists to agree to it. This is revisionist history with a vengeance. What disturbs me is not merely the interpretation but the way in which the insights of several generations of scholars from Chester Martin to Nicholas Mansergh are dismissed without even a serious discussion of the issues they raised. Perhaps I am just being overly sensitive as my book on *The Transition to Responsible Government* was also effectively ignored.<sup>13</sup> I do not feel particularly slighted. The treatment of Canada in the 19th-century volume is so brief it really could not seriously engage with Canadian historiography on virtually any issue.

In his review of the *Oxford History*, Bernard Porter declares that “Canadians may not appreciate Ged Martin’s delightfully skittish treatment of them in Volume Three”.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the impression one takes away from Martin’s chapter is that Canada in the 19th century was a bleak and barren place with little land suitable for farming; cities were slow to develop and those which did quickly reproduced the “horrors of old-world disease and slums”; and “the absence of large-scale mineral resources” meant that few fortunes could be made, which explains why there was “no Canadian Cecil Rhodes” (III, p. 527). One wonders then at the stupidity of those hundreds of thousands of British migrants who foolishly crossed the Atlantic to settle in this land of limited and little opportunity. Many of them, of course, did not stay but there was a tenfold increase in the Canadian population over the century. Martin dismisses this increase as “scarcely impressive on an Imperial scale” (III, p. 527). Perhaps so but it meant that by 1914 Canada had a larger population than either Scotland or Ireland, in fact nearly as large a population as the two combined. The standard of living of Canadians was rising and somehow they managed to find sufficient domestic savings to finance industrial expansion after 1879 and the boom years after 1901 (see III, p. 529). If there was no Cecil Rhodes, there was a Samuel Cunard, founder of the famous steamship line, a Lord Strathcona and Lord Mount Stephen, both of whom made huge fortunes out of building the CPR, and a young but rising Max Aitken (soon to become Lord Beaverbrook). After condemning the poor quality of Canadian politicians in the 19th century, Martin goes on to say that “The British governing elite knew little of Canada, less of the Maritimes, and generally behaved with patronizing superiority towards the colonials” (III, p. 528). Probably true, but why then go on to quote the critical and condescending comments of colonial governors as if they were accurate reflections of colonial reality? To be fair to Martin, part of the problem he faced was one of space and, given the limitations under which he was working, his chapter is well worth reading, especially the section dealing with the “British” identity of late-19th-century Canadians. But part of the problem was also with his conception of Canada as an intellectual and political backwater incapable of conforming “to a decolonisation model of progression through stages of self-government to full

12 For a defence of this belief, see P.A. Buckner, “The Transition to Responsible Government: Some Revisions in Need of Revising” in C.C. Eldridge, ed., *From Rebellion to Patriation: Canada and Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* ([Cardiff], 1989), pp. 1-25.

13 So forgive me for referring to it here: Phillip A. Buckner, *The Transition to Responsible Government: British Policy in British North America, 1815-1850* (Westport, Conn., 1985).

14 Bernard Porter, “An Awfully Big Colonial Adventure”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 January 2000.

independence" (III, p. 537). Could it be that it is this model that is faulty?

Now Martin is certainly not alone in his interpretation. It is an appealing one to those Australian, Canadian and New Zealand nationalists who see the imperial connection as a long and unfortunate aberration and who wish to write the Empire out of their histories. Yet in the 19th century a series of what James Belich has described as neo-Britains came into existence, formed out of the successive waves of migrants from the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> Marjory Harper describes the forces which led to this diaspora in her chapter on "British Migration and the Peopling of the Empire" and she recognizes how significant emigration was in promoting imperial awareness in Britain. But I am not convinced by her argument that by the end of the 19th century "the imperialism which was often a crucial component of [the] migrants' national identity . . . may well have impeded their assimilation and the development of colonial nationalism" (III, p. 86). Most of the children of earlier generations of British migrants to the colonies of settlement did not see loyalty to their neo-Britain as incompatible with loyalty to the land of their forebears. They had no difficulty in holding multiple national identities. The British Empire continued to be unique among the European empires (as the *Cambridge History* declared) because it created a series of colonies, dominated by British migrants and their descendants, which became independent in all but name but which remained willingly tied to the mother country. The inhabitants of these neo-Britains would have found offensive the notion that they were merely collaborators, for they thought of themselves as partners with the Britons at home in the extension of British power around the globe. In volume four of the *Oxford History* David MacKenzie declares that Canadians "had few dreams of 'empire' for themselves" (p. 576). That will come as news to the native peoples of the Prairie West. Western expansion was an act of imperialism and the creation of the North West Mounted Police and the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway were instruments of maintaining imperial control, which only later became symbols of a Canadian national identity. Canadians also participated in imperial expansion elsewhere. There were Canadian-born Britons serving with the British forces in the Crimea; one of the first medals awarded a Canadian overseas was a Toronto boy killed in the charge of the Light Brigade. The first Black to be awarded a VC in the Royal Navy was a Nova Scotian. Canadians spilt their blood for the Empire at Lucknow and in various parts of Africa, most notably alongside their fellow Britons during the South African War.<sup>16</sup> There were also Canadian-born missionaries along side British missionaries in Africa, the south Pacific and in China. And Canadian-born scientists, engineers, miners, doctors and mineralogists wherever the British flag (which was also of course the Canadian flag) flew. And what was true of Canadians was also true

15 James Belich, "Neo-Britains" (paper presented to the conference on "The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity", Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, 9 August 1998). Unfortunately Belich's paper has not yet been published, but many of the ideas are developed in his *Making Peoples: A History of New Zealanders From Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland, 1996) and *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the year 2000* (London, 2002).

16 See P.A. Buckner, "Canada" in David Omissi and Andrew Thompson, eds., *The Impact of the South African War* (Basingstoke, U.K., 2002).

of Australians, of New Zealanders, of English-speaking South Africans and of smaller British minorities elsewhere.

A famous imperial historian once said to me that imperial history must be about the centre or it is not imperial history. But this centre-periphery concept is misleading in the case of the British Empire in the 19th century. As James Belich has pointed out, we need to begin thinking not of a single British metropolis but of a “globally-scattered” metropolis, a trans-national cultural entity based upon a populist form of pan-Britonism.<sup>17</sup> In the *Oxford History* the flow of people, ideas and culture is viewed not entirely but largely as a one-way flow, from the metropolis outward. Collectively the authors seem to me to underestimate the impact of the empire – especially the colonies of settlement – in shaping domestic institutions and life. They virtually ignore, for example, the reverse flow of migrants from the colonies of settlements back to Britain, a flow which included businessmen like Lord Strathcona and Lord Beaverbrook, politicians like Andrew Bonar Law and Edward Blake, singers, writers and a host of others. While writing this paper I happened to see a picture in the *London Independent* of Maud Allen, a Canadian-born “exotic” dancer who became an Edwardian sex symbol.<sup>18</sup> The volumes of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (and the volumes of the Australian and New Zealand dictionaries of national biography) give an indication of how significant this migration was and how influential it was in helping to shape British imperial culture. Many more overseas Britons returned only briefly, as tourists, but they did not feel they were visiting a foreign country, only returning home. Others kept alive an association with the “old country” through the tens of millions of letters which flowed back and forth across the oceans between the Britons at home and the Britons overseas in the 19th century. Little of this dynamic relationship between the mother country and the neo-Britains overseas comes across in the *Oxford History*. There is a hint of it in John MacKenzie’s chapters but he is primarily concerned with “metropolitan” culture and even he does not talk about the relationship between the definition of British-ness at home and British-ness abroad. Indeed, I did not find a single reference to the important theoretical articles on this topic by the New Zealand-born J.G.A. Pocock, not even in the chapter on New Zealand.<sup>19</sup> The various Dominions are dealt with in separate chapters, without any serious discussion of common themes, almost as if they were already separate nations just waiting for the end of the imperial relationship.

In the 20th-century volume there is at least some recognition that this is an oversimplified model. Rob Holland recognizes the critical significance of the Dominions during the First World War. He is not always surefooted on the details relating to Canada, turning Henri Bourassa into a separatist and declaring that Bourassa “displaced Laurier as the acknowledged leader of Quebec”, which ignores the fact that it was Laurier who led the campaign against conscription in 1917 and

17 Belich, “Neo-Britains”.

18 *Independent* (London), 1 January 2000, “Weekend Review”, p. 11.

19 Pocock’s work was recently the focus of an AHR Forum on “The New British History in Atlantic Perspective”, *American Historical Review*, 104, 2 (April 1999), pp. 426-500. Unfortunately the debate focused almost entirely on the 17th and 18th centuries and on the Anglo-American relationship. For my own effort to apply some of Pocock’s insights, see P.A. Buckner, “Whatever Happened to the British Empire?”, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, new series, 3 (1994), pp. 1-31.

who remained the dominant Francophone politician (V, p. 126). But Holland deals sensitively with the issue of nationalism, recognizing that the War “did not create a Canadian, still less an Australian, identity that could be fully separated from the matrix of the British Empire” (V, p. 133). One reason why Canadians did not evolve a separate identity was, as John Darwin points out, that the model of Dominion status seemed adequate to most Canadians. The flow of emigration from the British Isles to the Dominions continued right up until the 1950s. Indeed, Gallup polls in Britain between 1948 and 1957 showed that nearly 30 to 40 per cent of respondents wished to emigrate, the vast majority of them to the Dominions (V, p. 168). Ironically, the 20th century also saw a heavy return migration of British migrants and their descendants; the census of 1931 counted 92,745 people born in the Dominions resident in Britain, many of them highly talented individuals attracted by opportunities at the centre of their imperial world (V, p. 176). An increasingly complex web of institutions bound this “British” world together. And in the Second World War, as in the First, the British in the Dominions rallied to the support of their Motherland. Yet curiously the tone of much of volume four might lead one to think differently. In his very fine study John Mackenzie talks of an “Indian Summer in the popular culture of Empire” (V, p. 229). It may have been an Indian Summer but it was not apparent to those who lived at the time. Indeed, the whole discussion of decolonization has a strongly teleological tone to it. The First World War delays it, then the Great Depression delays it, then the Second World War delays it. And even then it takes another two decades for the Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders to wake up. Slow learners, these colonials! Moreover, when they finally see the writing on the wall, they are persuaded to remain part of an expanded British Commonwealth of Nations, created by the British Government as an instrument for perpetuating British informal influence over its former colonies. Put simplistically, this appears to be the essence of the argument advanced in the *Oxford History*.

The *Cambridge History of the British Empire* accepted as a given that Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and English-speaking South Africans were co-owners of the British Empire and its history. The *Oxford History of the British Empire* essentially rejects that claim. It sees the British overseas as colonials rather than as imperialists. In virtually every respect the *Oxford History of the British Empire* is far more sophisticated, far more balanced and nuanced, and far more satisfying than the *Cambridge History*. But in this one area the *Cambridge History* may have been closer to getting it right than the *Oxford History*, even if it did so for the wrong reasons. I am not making some nostalgic lament for the world we have lost nor arguing that the relationship between Britain and the neo-Britains overseas was the only significant aspect of Britain’s imperial past. But this relationship was a crucial part of the history of the Empire.

But if the *Oxford History* is to be criticized for downplaying the significance of the Dominions to the Empire, contemporary Canadian (and Australian and New Zealand) historians must accept some responsibility for encouraging them to do so. In an interesting change of heart, Canadian historians no longer want to share in Britain’s imperial past. Thus in his chapter on “Canada, the North Atlantic Triangle and the Empire”, David Mackenzie sees the imperial connection as simply an aspect of “the larger, triangular relationship between Britain, the United States, and Canada” (IV, p. 575). Canadians’ commitment to the Empire is seen in purely strategic terms –

“playing up Canada’s ‘Britishness’ to deflect American intrusions, or emphasizing Canada’s ‘American heritage’ to combat Imperial centralizers” (IV, p. 575). Gradually, the balance of forces in the triangle shifted and inevitably Canada had perforce to accept that Britain could no longer play its role and Canada moved out of Britain’s formal empire and became part of America’s informal empire. MacKenzie argues his case effectively and it is line with most of the recent liberal nationalist scholarship. So too is the article by Doug Owrarn in volume five of the *Oxford History* on the historiography of “Canada and the Empire”. After a quick survey of the earlier scholarship, Owrarn declares that by the 1960s the study of Canada and the Empire had become a specialized field of little interest to most Canadian historians, except those who were born and made their living outside of Canada (I guess that leaves me out which may be why he also ignores my Presidential Address to the Canadian Historical Association on this subject).<sup>20</sup> The focus of real Canadian historians has been on the broader field of international relations rather than Commonwealth or imperial studies (V, p. 159). Owrarn admits that there is some interest in the topic of immigration, of “how the British adjusted, or failed to adjust to their new homeland” but he does not see this as essentially an imperial theme. And he admits that there is some interest in studying Imperialism as a form of Canadian nationalism à la Carl Berger. But the notion of ‘empire’ in Canada, he declares, has always been bilateral and the true concern of Canadian historians should be not with imperial history but with “the origin of Canada” (V, p. 161). In any event the historiography of empire in Canada is “in reality only partly about Empire” (in which Canadians were obviously not interested per se) but primarily about what was Canada’s “main link to the wider world” (V, p. 162).

This is a comforting approach for Canadian nationalists, who prefer that Canadians be thought of as part of the colonized rather than as part of the colonizers. In fact, as every member of a First Nation is only too well aware, it is also patently absurd. True decolonization has not and never will take place in Canada, any more than in the United States and it is profoundly ahistorical to pretend that Canadians were passive rather than active imperialists. Indeed, Canadians were late converts to the notion of turning the “British” commonwealth into a multinational commonwealth. Canada did not endorse the grant of Dominion Status to India until after World War Two and then only grudgingly. It did not speak out against South Africa until the 1960s. Doug Owrarn may believe it is the duty of historians to create national myths; I believe it is our duty to confront them. But I agree with his general argument about the lack of interest of Canadian historians in the imperial connection. The irony, of course, is that by denying the Empire’s significance in Canadian history, they are also denying Canada’s significance to the Empire, ensuring that Canadian history is studied almost entirely within Canada and by Canadians, and justifying the kind of treatment which it receives in the *Oxford History*.

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20 See Buckner, “Whatever Happened to the British Empire?”