Introduction: perspectives, policies, and people

At the beginning of the fifth century, St Augustine, bishop of Hippo, contemplated from his North African home the still-vast domains of the Roman empire. He debated the question of whether it was fitting for good men to rejoice at the expansion of empires over less civilised peoples. He concluded that extending rulership over subjugated nations might seem to bad men felicity, but good men could accept it as a necessity. Many generations since have asked the same question as Augustine, when they encountered empires of all kinds, from theocracies to thalassocracies. Some have been called beneficent, designated with the honorific 'Pax'. Some have been called evil. All of them have excited controversy and continue to do so. The British empire is no exception. None, however, rivalled it for complexity and geographical spread. Those who ran it firmly believed in its fundamental Augustinian necessity. Their sense of duty perhaps blinded them to an inherent infelicity.[1]

To understand this complicated and ambivalent British enterprise is a challenge, but a rewarding one. Writing about British overseas experience has been opened up fruitfully in several directions in the past fifty years. Fresh perspectives have come from the concept of 'informal empire', and from different disciplines, such as global and comparative history,[2] from anthropology and 'history-from-below', and from various manifestations of cultural history, such as sport, masculinity, and women's history. 'Wider still and wider, shall thy bounds be set' may be an undesirable motto for an empire, but it is a good one for imperial history.

All empires occupy simultaneously two different kinds of space: the world stage – alongside and sometimes in geopolitical competition with other empires – and alien localities over which some degree of rulership is established. They may also occupy a third arena, the historical imagination, as the Roman empire did for the British. Globally, wars were fought between imperial powers: Britain against France and Spain in the eighteenth century, through to Britain against Germany in East Africa, and against Japan in South-East Asia in the twentieth. International competition helped to drive forward imperial boundaries on the North-West

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Frontier of India and in the partitions of Africa and the Pacific. For these reasons, a global context for the empire is called for. At the same time, dynamic situations in the localities need to be examined, as European 'bridgeheads' in overseas territories were enlarged. Once begun, the process of interaction between European and non-Western societies never stopped. The empire cannot therefore be properly understood without moving beyond the metropolis and into the periphery.

Within the arena of the historical imagination, Rome was the obvious comparison for the classically educated British ruling elite to make. Many administrators had visited the Eternal City and read Gibbon on *Decline and fall*. Commentators like James Bryce, Lord Cromer, and the Colonial Office senior official Sir Charles Lucas, explored comparisons between the Roman and the British empires. 'In spite of the obvious dangers', wrote Lord Cromer, 'and making allowances for differences, the history of Imperial Rome can never cease to be of more than academic interest to the statesmen and politicians of Imperial England.' Rome, he added, 'bequeathed to us much that is of inestimable value, both in the way of precept and example', such as the preference for allowing diversity over imposed uniformity.[3] However, perhaps the most influential writer on the Roman theme was Robert Baden-Powell. 'B-P' originally conceived of the Scout movement as a means of preserving the British empire against the fate of the Roman empire. The same causes of decay were, he believed, at work: 'the decline of good citizenship . . . the growth of luxury and idleness'. British boys must not be disgraced like the young Romans of old who lost the empire of their forefathers by neglecting their 'bodily strength', becoming 'wishy-washy slackers without any go or patriotism in them'.[4]

When it came to the contemporary context, the United States of America was the overshadowing reality. The Americans were the first breakaway colonials, and ever thereafter, right through to the emergence of the USA as the sole superpower, what the Americans did challenged, fascinated, and dogged the British. In the nineteenth century it was a continuing necessity to contain or accommodate to the rival expansion emerging across the Atlantic. In the twentieth century it was a question of staying on the right side of an ever-more ascendant America – 'a state twenty-five times as large, five times as wealthy, three times as prosperous, twice as ambitious' as Britain.[5] Preserving the most cordial relations with 'our kinsmen', said Joseph Chamberlain in 1897, was 'almost a religion'.[6] But how to tell if the so-called 'special relationship' was genuinely reciprocal? And how serious was the long-term threat of the 'Americanisation of the world'? One answer was provided by the comforting illusion that the USA was still in some sense within the British

orbit, fusing its immigrants 'into an English mould'. 'Greater Britain', declared Sir Charles Dilke in 1868, included 'our Magna Graecia of the United States', which could offer the 'English race the moral dictator-ship of the globe'.[7] Cecil Rhodes as a young man hoped for the recovery of the USA as an integral part of the British empire, and made it his ambition to roll the Anglo-Saxon race into one empire. (This is why his scheme for Rhodes Scholars reserved scholarships for Americans.) In similar vein, Kipling urged the Americans in 1898 to 'take up the white man's burden'; while, after 1945, there were officials who hoped to 'educate the Americans' for the role of propping up the British empire 'in the interests of American security' (see p. 276 below). If the 'special relationship' failed to fulfil the more euphoric expectations, it remains the case that alignment with the USA has been, for good or ill, the most remarkable British geopolitical achievement of the twentieth century.

Sir John Seeley (Regius professor of modern history at Cambridge, 1869 to 1895), described the loss of the American colonies as an event 'pregnant with infinite consequences'. It had left behind permanent doubts, misgivings, and despair. But mutual influence and close contact remained, and 'the whole future of the planet depends on it'.[8] Certainly there were enduring lessons to be learned. The evolution of colonial responsible self-government was a long-term constitutional effect of the American Revolution. Above all there was a visceral determination never again to go through the psychological nightmare of fighting 'kith and kin'. Between the 1920s and the 1960s this had major implications for dealing with recalcitrant settler groups in Kenya and Rhodesia, who could not be brought into line by force, whether gunboats, or what Harold Wilson called 'a thunderbolt'. Nevertheless, historians still broadly accept that there is a legitimate division into 'first' and 'second' empires at around 1781, despite reservations about continuities of motive and method. There clearly was a fundamentally different 'feel' to an integrated trans-atlantic empire with thirteen American colonies and one without them. Accordingly, few modern histories deal with both the 'first' and 'second' empires together. The emphasis here is on the latter.

Perhaps surprisingly, until very recently British observers seldom developed comparisons between the American empire after 1898 and their own. The Philippines were simply too far away to attract any inter-est in Britain. Even Attlee in 1945 did not know exactly where they were, and mispronounced 'Filipino'.[9] What was true of British ignorance of the American empire was little different elsewhere. British administrators were not really interested in how other empires were run, and certainly did not think there might be useful guidance in making comparisons. (Kenneth Robinson, developing an expertise in the Colonial Office,

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1936 to 1948, on the French colonial empire, seems to be the exception which proves the rule.) Before the 1940s there was little English historical writing about the Spanish and Portuguese empires. What the Dutch did in Indonesia was essentially out of view until the Second World War. The German empire was short-lived and had a bad reputation after the suppression of the Maji-Maji and Herero revolts. Tanganyika, however, had been Germany's 'jewel in the crown'. Before 1914, in railway development, mapping, the promotion of sisal, rubber, and cotton growing, and in agricultural research, the Germans in Tanganyika were far ahead of the British in Kenya.[10] The Belgians seemed tainted by association after King Leopold's 'red rubber' scandal in the Congo, which British investigators did so much to publicise. The Russian empire was a specialist interest for nervous Indian experts like Lord Curzon, although 'the Great Game' came before a wider public in Kipling's great novel *Kim* (1901).

Only the French and British in the New Hebrides Condominium and in Africa as imperial near neighbours had much awareness of each other. There were differences of approach. M. Sarraut addressed the African Society in 1933, suggesting that the British had an 'excess of scepticism', whereas the French had 'an excess of faith' about the possibility of improving the lives of Africans. 'You build day by day on what already exists. We dream of new and rectilinear architecture. You listen especially to the prudent but rather cold counsel of experience. We warm our action to the flame of apostleship.'[11] In other words, the French took a more constructionalist approach. The French policy of 'assimilation' included the fiction by which colonies were regarded as parts of France. Chiefs became more obviously agents of the central government in a way they were not under the British system of 'Indirect Rule'. The French *mission civilisatrice* meant there was no teaching in the vernacular as in British colonies. But while the French made it possible for privileged individuals to 'evolve' into culturally recognised black Frenchmen, few succeeded and this was not the goal for most *indigènes*.[12] After the Second World War there was a brief attempt by officials of the two countries to co-operate on a number of development policies for Africa, but the experiment was not a success.

As far as the indigenous peoples were concerned, the main difference between the European rulers was felt in terms of which foreign language they had to speak. French policy may have produced a more uniform nationalist elite than the British, but this did not give them much advantage in achieving independence. Decolonisation occurred in both empires at roughly the same time.

The methodological attempt to move beyond preoccupation with

elites and colonial administrators and government files is especially
associated with Indian 'subaltern studies' led by Ranajit Guha. The first
of these appeared in 1982. The term is derived from Antonio Gramsci,
and paradoxically it takes its name from the designation for junior army
officers. 'Subaltern studies' aims to describe the history of ordinary folk
in indigenous society, and to study them not as excluded categories or
passive victims, but as 'the subject in their own history'.[13] But 'history-
from-below', even in 1982, was nothing new, and if one looks for a
foundational text it is probably E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English
working class* (1963), which famously sought to rescue ordinary men and
women from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.[14] However,
five years even before that, there was a landmark publication in the
empire field: George Shepperson and Thomas Price's book about the
Chilembwe uprising in Malawi, *Independent African*. Shepperson was
also alive to its international links, with his studies of black American
influences on African nationalism.[15] Imperial historians interested in
Africa were now beginning to try to recover an African voice and agency.
R.E. Robinson's essays on 'non-European foundations' and 'indigenous
reactions' firmly shifted the emphasis to the study of European rule as
it interacted with local societies, which retained a surprising ability to
influence the terms of engagement. For Robinson, 'the possibilities of
imperial dominion were calculated in terms of indigenous collaboration
and resistance'. Older Eurocentric theories were founded on 'a grand
illusion': 'Any new theory must recognise that imperialism was as much
a function of its victims' collaboration or non-collaboration – of their
indigenous politics – as it was of European expansion.'[16]

The concept of 'the Other' has been one of the more unavoidable his-
torical *tropes* to establish itself in recent years. 'Othering', at its simplest,
is the attempt to understand the actions and thought-worlds of commu-
nities perceived as culturally alien, often by comparing them with a sup-
posed 'norm'. In a sense this is what anthropologists have always done.
But there is a twist. As now understood, 'the Other' stands in apposition
to Self. 'Othering' has tended to develop into a 'process by which a group
of people establishing a sense of their own identity creates a hostile image
of a second group which embodies all the characteristics and features the
first group most dislikes and fears'.[17] This is not unlike what psychoana-
lysts call 'projection', and it certainly has pathological implications, since
this kind of self-evaluation leads to gratuitous denigration of others.
The 'othering' of indigenous peoples, within the framework of colonial
relationships, became in the nineteenth century an inherent function of
empire-building. It lies at the root of much of the racial prejudice asso-
ciated with empires. It hardly needs to be said that inability to see the

Other as human is a recipe for disaster. Or that states trying to impose their will on cultures of which they are ignorant can be dangerous.

Inaccurate Western stereotypes spoke of 'inscrutable orientals' and 'naked savages' as fanatics and fatalists, as vicious and libidinous. It was not simply a one-way process. For their part, Africans and Asians might see a threatening 'otherness' in Europeans. Until well into the twentieth century, Chinese peasant mothers would shield their babies from the foreigner's unlucky gaze, particularly that of the British 'red [hair] devils'. For many societies, the whites might be irreligious (infidel and unclean), vulgar, and materialistic barbarians, and their priests might be feared as cannibals or vampires (see p. 203 at n. 24). One of the early chaplains in India, Frederick Swartz, was berated by an Indian in Tanjore: 'Christian religion! Devil religion! Christian much drink, much do wrong, much beat, much abuse others'; and when Swartz warned a trainee dancing-girl that no bad person went to heaven, she retorted, 'Alas, sir, in that case hardly any European will ever enter it.'[18]

Towards the end of the eighteenth century there was a serious attempt by Warren Hastings as governor-general in India, and those British scholars he encouraged, to understand Indian culture. Sir Charles Wilkins translated one-third of the *Mahabharata*, the longest epic poem in the world, starting with the famous *Bhagavad Gita* in 1785. This was the first major translation of Hindu Sanskrit into a European language. Wilkins thus opened up the path to modern Indology. In Calcutta in 1784 Sir William Jones, jurist and philologist, founded the Asiatick Society of Bengal to encourage enquiry into the history, arts, sciences, and literature of Asia. Two years later he disconcertingly proposed that Greek and Latin may have descended from Sanskrit, which he eulogised as 'more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin'. In 1789 he published a translation of *Shakuntala*, a play by the Indian dramatist Kalidasa, derived from the *Mahabharata*. Jones was a polymath with a pathbreaking output on many aspects of Indian civilisation. What he achieved shows that 'the production of colonial knowledge could involve Western enquirer and Eastern informant in a dialogue characterised by reciprocity, pluralism and equality'.[19] In Germany the Romantic enthusiasm for the culture of the East was if anything even more pronounced; nevertheless, this group of Britishers brought 'unexpected gifts of knowledge and sensibility . . . from the periphery in the eighteenth century'.[20]

For all foreigners, China was unquestionably alien. To the Victorians it was a chaotic, baffling, and annoying society with an unyielding ethnocentricism. It had not always been seen like that. The pundits of the European Enlightenment idealised China in the eighteenth century as a model stable polity governed by reason, a Pax Sinica. Voltaire's *Essai*

sur les moeurs (begun in 1740) actually started off with China, and in an admiring way. He praised Confucianism for its rationalistic ethics and freedom from priestly mystifications. But the assessment of China radically changed from the 1790s, as contact became closer (and realities emerged), and as Europe itself, and Britain especially, entered a period of unprecedented change. What had once been admired as stability was now derided as stagnation.[21] Two entirely different worlds began to confront one another: one dedicated to openness, innovation, and free exchange of goods; the other closed, introspective, cursing change and interchange, rejecting novelty – and both of them, proud and ethnocentric. For the Chinese what was codified could not be changed. Rituals established long ago, and once and for all, were the very foundation of civilisation. Alteration meant tampering with the written characters of the language, which was an assault on reality itself. What might displease the ancestors was interdicted, for ancestor-worship sanctified an unassailable paternal perfection. The tenets of Confucianism legitimised both imperial rule at Peking (Beijing) and family patriarchy in the village. It was not that China was inert, but it was mired in inertia, both personal and institutional. And so the Ch'ing (Qing) government rebuffed British embassies seeking freedom of trade, in 1792–4 (led by Lord Macartney), and again in 1816 (led by Lord Amherst), and in 1834 (led by Lord Napier). In the loftily dismissive words of the edict of Emperor Ch'ien-lung (Qianlong), 'The Celestial Empire . . . does not value rare and precious things or ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures.' The residence of a Western representative at court was not allowed by protocol, and would be of 'no advantage to your country'. It required two wars to open China to British trade, in 1839–42 and 1856–60. Only from the 1860s did a change of Chinese attitudes slowly unfold.[22]

Despite frustration with the Chinese, a handful of Britishers made great efforts to understand them. None was more remarkable than Isabella Bishop, who, after a visit to Canton in 1878–9, in the mid-1890s made an astonishing journey to Korea and Chinese Manchuria, immediately followed by an exuberant plunge into the Yangtse Valley, through Szechwan (Sichuan) to the Tibetan border, travelling alone by horse, sedan-chair, and boat across eight thousand miles, an epic 'long march' hardly equalled by Mao Tse-tung himself in 1934–5. For all the faults and mysteriousness of the Chinese, she believed 'their tenacity, resourcefulness . . . and respect for law and literature place [them] in the van of Asian nations'.[23] Another who understood the potential of China was Sir Robert Hart, who ran the Customs from 1868 to 1907: 'If China will only do the right thing, she will be in a century the most powerful

empire on earth – the least aggressive – the most tolerant – and the great-est patron of learning' (1900).[24] Towering above all Sinologists is the enigmatic figure of Joseph Needham, CH, FRS, FBA, initiating author of the hyper-massive *Science and civilization in China*, first conceived in the 1940s when he was a cultural attaché in China. Needham was a bio-chemist of repute, who began learning Chinese in about 1937. He came to think of himself as above all 'an honorary Taoist', but without relin-quishing his commitments to Morris-dancing, high-church Anglicanism (he was a lay reader), and a Marxism which welcomed the Chinese com-munist revolution. As a vocal critic of 'Western imperialism and cultural arrogance', he advocated a dialogue of civilisations.[25]

Needham was of course highly exceptional in his wide-ranging intel-ligence and sympathies. Outsiders are usually best qualified to under-stand societies *relatively* like their own and to penetrate their myths and realities. Consider, for example, the astonishing insight which three Frenchmen attained into the working of democracies in other coun-tries: Alexis de Tocqueville for America (1835), André Siegfried for New Zealand (1914), and Elie Halévy for England (1912–32). It was, however, an Englishman, J.E.C. Bodley (in his book *France*, 1907), who saw the French better than they could see themselves. Or consider how much American historians have contributed to British imperial and naval history (L.H. Gipson, A.J. Marder, and others), not least in our own day, the Texas-based historian (via Harvard, Oxford, and Yale) Wm. Roger Louis. But the more unlike our own societies other countries are, the harder it is to fathom them. Even European offshoot societies within the so-called 'British world' can seem obtuse. Looking for similarities can help. South Africa's Afrikaner apartheid regime, for example, showed parallels with ancient Sparta holding down the helots, or Prussia confronting the Slavs, or Israel the Palestinian Arabs; all four are examples of communities feeling themselves to be superior to, but threatened by, a numerically larger, alien population, an Other. In each case the dominant minority developed authoritarian, intransigent, and militaristic attitudes and strategies. It is, however, much harder for Westerners to enter into the mentalities of pre-literate peoples, or those, like the Chinese, whose structures of thought are sophisticated but radically different. Nevertheless, we have to get beyond the intel-lectual barriers and the simplistic clichés ('the Confucian ethic', 'fanati-cal Islam', 'unchanging Africa'). Like Needham we have to recognise that Western philosophies and systems are not the only valid way of summing up the whole of human experience and wisdom. As the great literary theorist and Sinophil I.A. Richards came to realise in China in the early 1930s:

This is how we all think – to us the Western world is still the World; but an impartial observer would perhaps say that such provincialism is dangerous. And we are not yet so happy in the West that we can be sure that we are not suffering from its effects . . . For with the increasing pressure of world contacts we do pitiably need to understand on a scale we have never envisaged before.[26]

Accordingly, we cannot be content to look in upon other cultures from the outside, but must draw upon imaginative and empathetic resources to understand them from within, looking outward.[27]

What does it mean, for instance, to study Africa 'from within', looking outward? The historian tries to comprehend the implications of living in small-scale, pre-literate, polygynous, and perhaps 'stateless' communities (where horizontal age-mate structures hold things together, rather than any vertical hierarchies). These may be societies with sophisticated notions of honour and family duty (expressed in kinship obligations, and in subtle distinctions between 'mother's brother' and 'father's brother', instead of a crude blanket term like 'uncle'). Traditional African marriage was a contract between kin-groups rather than between romantically involved individuals, and pastoral peoples thought in terms of 'wives and other cattle'.[28] Incalculable importance has been attached to the possession of cattle for social, ritual, political, and aesthetic reasons. Cattle are a measure of status, a means of mediation with ancestor spirits, and a necessity for ratifying marriage. Amongst many African peoples, too, land has been traditionally viewed as a commodity to be enjoyed in common, which, no more than the air we breathe, could be regarded as unilaterally alienable private property. Dead ancestors had rights in it, and although chiefs might convey rights of *use* and obligations of responsibility to individuals, this was still miles away from Western ideas of property rights. Only with such considerations in mind can we register the full significance for Africans of the alienation of land to Europeans, or the 1890s rinderpest epidemics. In the twentieth century, too, this 'thought-world' explains their alarm about land-apportionment and rehabilitation schemes, or veterinary embargoes or government destocking programmes. Furthermore, most African societies were not 'static'. The readiness with which they could adopt innovation was striking. To give just one example: guns sometimes became new symbols of masculinity so completely for Africans that European attempts to disarm them were greatly resented, as was the case for the Basotho, or the Yao of Nyasaland, who protested 'we are now as children'.

Important as it is to see them 'from within', the history of other societies can also be illuminated by instructive parallels with European ones. In terms of purely military innovation and growing megalomania, Shaka Zulu between 1818 and 1828 can bear comparison with Alexander the

Great in the fourth century BC. The preoccupations of African leaders or Chinese scholar-officials in the nineteenth century were similar to those of their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European counterparts, and in some respects to those of their contemporary counterparts too. The gradual resolution of tensions between centre and periphery, as consolidating and unitary state-building processes advanced (or receded), the reduction (or growth) of regional autonomies and provincial resistance, all formed part and parcel of the history of every major country in the world, of Mughal India and Maoist China as well as medieval France and modern Germany. What Julius Caesar did for the Roman Republic, what Henry II did for the Angevin empire, what the early Tudors did for England, was to rescue states from overmighty subjects, lack of governance and bureaucratic breakdown, local warlords, and internecine conflicts within ruling elites. They then reconstituted popular allegiance and administrative machinery. Understanding this makes it easier to measure the achievement of Moshoeshoe in re-creating and holding together nineteenth-century Lesotho, or Mao Tse-tung in the 1930s and 1940s imposing some sort of central control (however nasty) on the amorphous chaos of China. In these circumstances government becomes of necessity a personal *tour de force*.[29]

Moreover, the ways in which more impersonal bureaucracies emerge are not totally dissimilar in Tudor England and in late eighteenth-century Asante in the Gold Coast.[30] Techniques of warding off external attack show similarities throughout the world. Sparta in sixth-century Greece avoided fighting in much the same way as Dahomey in nineteenth-century West Africa, both achieving immunity from attack for long periods through manipulating a range of propaganda weapons which cumulatively created an impression of terrifying invincibility. While Sparta manipulated the Delphic Oracle, Dahomey contrived to frighten off Europeans by deliberately exaggerating the extent of its 'cannibalism'. The Maori, however, rather foolishly let it be known that European flesh was not sweet enough for their taste.[31] Conspicuous largesse and hospitality as the test of rank and the most admired virtue among leading squires and nobles in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Britain are reflected exactly in the attributes expected of the chief in African societies.[32] Many pages of Thompson's *Making of the English working class* deal with the kind of millenarian expectations which have been so widespread in African history. In particular his treatment of Joanna Southcott of Devonshire (*c.*1800) forms an ideal prelude to studying the upheavals caused by African prophetesses, from Nongqawuse in Xhosaland in 1856–7 to Alice Lenshina a hundred years later in Zambia.[33] In short, whilst being ever alert to complex difference, we