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# The Durham Report and British Policy

## A Critical Essay

**GED MARTIN**

*Research Fellow, Magdalene College, Cambridge*

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# Contents

	Preface	vii
1	The place of the Report in Commonwealth history	1
2	The historical context of the Durham Mission	4
3	The reception of the Report	29
4	The influence of the Report on Commonwealth history	42
5	The growth of the myth	74
	Bibliography	102
	Biographical notes	109
	Index	115

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[More information](#)

## Preface

This book owes its origin to the History of the Commonwealth paper in Part II of the Cambridge Historical Tripos. I began teaching for this paper shortly after the start of a much larger research project of studying British policy towards British North America from 1837 to 1867. It was not long before I became aware of a gap between the books the undergraduates read about the Durham Report and what I was finding from my own work. There was a much greater awareness of Canadian problems in the late eighteen-thirties than was generally allowed, the extensive correspondence between Elgin and Grey at the time when responsible government was introduced into Canada was without a single reference to the Durham Report, and so on. At first, like many recent writers on the subject, I tried to moderate the extreme claims without attacking the main thesis that Durham was in some way a formative influence. This was an unsatisfactory compromise and I decided instead to discard the whole myth and start afresh. Once the preconceptions were shaken off, a very different picture appeared. The idea that Durham had been betrayed over the Bermuda ordinance quickly became untenable. Viewed through the eyes of contemporaries, including close friends and relatives, the Durham mission became a series of unpardonable disasters crowned by a departure unjustifiable both in itself and in the manner with which it was announced. Consequently Durham's contribution to the discussion of colonial policy was influential largely as an embarrassment. When I looked for the origin of Durham's fame as an Empire-builder I found that his reputation had revived too long after the event to make it possible to argue that it was an assessment of contemporaries, and too early to be claimed as the fruits of modern historical scholarship. In this I do not wish to slight the work of many imperial historians whom I greatly admire, but I do feel that the myth of the Durham Report is bound up with a constitutional approach to Commonwealth history, and that there is a case for attempting to interpret the subject from a different standpoint. I hope this book will be a contribution to that work of

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Ged Martin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

revision. Certainly my first thanks should go to all those who have studied the History of the Commonwealth at Cambridge and kept me continually aware of the problem.

My particular thanks are due to my friend Ronald Hyam for encouraging me to look at the subject from a new angle, and for his many suggestions particularly in the period of later imperial history which he knows so well. My thanks are also warmly given to Professor E. T. Stokes, general editor of the Commonwealth series, who first suggested this form of publication and has since aroused admiration for the patient way in which he has dealt with a particularly difficult author. I am also grateful to Professor Angus Ross of the University of Otago for his valuable comments, and to Dr J. R. Pole, my research supervisor, for his encouragement. I make no reference to my wife's services in deference to her wish that she should not be mentioned.

I owe thanks to the staffs of a large number of libraries and archives, especially to the University Library, Cambridge, the resources of which never fail to amaze me. All material from Crown-copyright records in the Public Record Office is published by permission of the Controller of the Stationery Office. I am grateful to have been able to use other manuscript collections listed in the bibliography, and my thanks are due to Mr Russell Ellice, Sir Fergus Graham and the Duke of Newcastle for permission to publish material from their family papers.

Ged Martin

*Magdalene College  
Cambridge  
January 1972*