

1

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide importance of imperialism in the late nineteenth century is unavoidable. It was, as E. J. Hobsbawm says, 'both a novel and historically *central* development'.¹ It was tied to the European capitalism of that time and was manifest in the extension of territory, military endeavour, domination of colonies and their closer union with the metropolis. Contemporaries recognised it. The clash of European powers was obvious. Australians could see it in the Pacific and were constantly reminded of their membership of the British empire. Yet imperialism has posed a problem for the study of Australia.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 21 May 1887 detected a change in British imperialism with a move from an emphasis on diplomacy and armed power to the encouragement of colonies '(consolidating) their national defences and by that means helping England to hold her own in the event of her being drawn into the great war which is now impending in Europe'. Imperialism, whether viewed as expansion or consolidation, was, however, unpopular in Sydney and not always regarded as suitable to Australia. This suspicion of imperialism was recognisable in British liberalism of the time and posed a problem in both Britain and Australia — if imperialism were to prosper it would need a new formulation. The suggestion in the *Herald* of a shift from a jingoism to an imperial alliance with the self-governing colonies seemed to put them in a separate category within the empire and that was given an increased emphasis. A famous publicist of empire, Professor Seeley, and a famous critic, J. A. Hobson, adopted this approach. In this way the consolidation of the empire could be seen as an extension of democracy, not of autocracy which the liberals feared. Moreover, the implicit, sometimes explicit, bond of racial complicity was welcome at a time of Social Darwinism. Calls in Britain for the closer union of the empire could thus be reconciled with emergent nationalism in the colonies and yet the budgetary, strategic and economic benefits could still be secured.

This tendency to put imperialism—in the sense of extension of empire and rule of indigenous peoples—to one side in considering Australia, was strengthened in the twentieth century. Ideas of colonial nationalism and dominion status seemingly confirmed

2 BRITISH IMPERIALISM AND AUSTRALIAN NATIONALISM

the special character of the settlement colonies. There also developed, from 1918, the Cold War, so that in some quarters it was thought that imperialism was a Leninist notion with special reference to the 'developing countries' and on both counts not applicable to Australia. It was also associated in Australian historical discourse with an imperial history writing which left Australia as a bit-player in somebody else's drama.

Questions were, however, asked about this. Brian Fitzpatrick in the late 1930s, Humphrey McQueen a generation later and a clutch of still more recent authors pointed to the ways in which Australia was a dependency of Britain. What was at issue usually was the unequal economic relationship. The suggestion was not so much of coercion but of an economic development which made the formal or informal colony subordinate to the metropolitan country. This is the language of Dependency theory developed initially to apply to Latin American examples. They seemed analogous since Australia might be thought of as an informal colony with its formal ties to Britain becoming attenuated.

It was difficult to define Australia's date of independence, which seemed a paradox after a generation of decolonisation around the world. W. J. Hudson in 1988 reminded his readers of just how constitutionally dependent the nineteenth-century colonies were. The Governors were responsible to London and had reserve powers, the legislative bodies were subordinate in that some legislation could be reserved for consideration in Britain or disallowed, the British parliament could legislate for the colonies, colonial governments could not act internationally or make treaties. Indeed, the need to be reminded of this was evidence of the way in which the imperial constitutional studies of previous generations had fallen from view.

Dependency theory, with its reference to Latin America, invited comparative studies of settler societies. The best of these, Donald Denoon's study of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile, suggested fruitful comparisons and offered a taxonomy of what he termed dominion capitalism. But this was Hamlet without the Prince. In a brief reference to imperialism he suggested that its role was to protect rather than threaten the colonies.

Looking at the twentieth-century Australian wool industry, Kosmas Tsokhas dismissed the idea of subordination to Britain as an imperial fallacy, for parts of Australian industry did well out of the connexion. This was useful in helping to identify the way in which imperialism benefited specific classes in both Britain and Australia.²

This century-long debate which I have sketched so imperfectly suggests a number of issues. Firstly, there seems to be a need to see still more clearly Australia's sub-imperial role in the Pacific and elsewhere so that the Australian share in the process of imperialism is not obscured. Secondly, it is necessary to break down the country-wide units, so as to capture the different experience of imperialism of Queenslanders and Victorians, women and men, working class and middle class. In that way imperialism may be seen as the interaction of, say, different classes in the different countries rather than as an international relationship. Thirdly, integration of the different facets of imperialism is necessary, so that, for example, the links between defence and investments might be clarified.

The recent British imperial historiography has, naturally, rather different components and is itself part of still larger debates. Attempts have been made to play down the dramatic changes involved in the industrial revolution and see it as an incremental process.

In social terms this has brought an emphasis on continuity from some writers so that the triumph of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of the working class were redefined. Imperialism has been fitted into this perspective at a number of points. Davis and Huttenback in *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire*, although written for a different purpose, fitted well with free-trade neo-Cobdenism of the 1980s in attempting to show that the empire was unprofitable. It suggested that the self-governing colonies did well from the empire, but both the figures and the assumptions have been criticised.

Cain and Hopkins speak of 'Gentlemanly capitalism' which persisted in the late nineteenth century as a junction of landowning and finance interests, a formulation made possible by reducing the role of the bourgeoisie. This brings to the fore the important point that the City of London, as centre of finance, was a core of imperialism. The emphasis on the flows of capital as the taproot of empire takes us back to J. A. Hobson, author of *Imperialism* and later Lenin who made this point. For Hobson, however, the focus was on Britain and he saw the problem as one of maldistribution of income in Britain, and of underconsumption, which led to imperialism.³

Australia was a major recipient of British capital, but Hobson did not pursue the impact in the self-governing colonies and the way that this interacted with the imperial relationship. Cain and Hopkins have likewise been criticised for being too metropolitan in their perspective. Indeed their larger framework, with its recasting of the industrial revolution and the role of the industrial capitalists, has been criticised powerfully by Pat Hudson and M. J. Daunton. The City was very much more than a purely financial centre dominated by the concerns of gentlemanly capitalism. Insurance, transport and commerce were important. Discussing City merchants in the wool trade with Australia, Daunton remarks that their 'connections were not within British society with landed interests, but with groups in the colonies'.⁴ It is a comment which reminds us of the colonies themselves and the social structures in both Britain and Australia. Contemporaries were well aware of the connexions, as they were aware of the industrial revolution, capital, labour and class. The debate has, however, been useful in focussing attention on British finance, although the attempt to separate it from the larger productive system and industry can be misleading. Moreover, it has formed a useful part of that large debate on the decline of Britain.

The fear of British decline forms the setting of the first section of this book which develops the theme of British imperialism in the years 1880–86. It involved the formation of an Australian Federal Council, an extension of influence in the Pacific and steps towards military and naval integration, including the Sudan contingent, the first Australian armed force to serve British imperial advance outside Australasia. Much of this was seen by contemporaries as strengthening the unity of the empire and that drew its logic, in part, from the large British capital flows to Australia and the importance of Australian markets. Examination, however, reminds us of the multilateral nature of the relationships and the domestic programmes which the participants were pursuing.

It is not surprising that the rhetoric of imperialism helped foster an Australian nationalism, sometimes in conflict with the empire, sometimes assimilated to it. It had ethnic, racial, social and gender dimensions. This is the theme of Chapters 6–8. They are focussed on the late 1880s and early 1890s, but some of the issues need a longer time span.

4 BRITISH IMPERIALISM AND AUSTRALIAN NATIONALISM

Gladstone's Irish Home Rule bill, for example, involved colonial models and the definition of the colonial condition; it raised calls for continued imperial unity but brought a quite different response from the substantial communities of Irish descent in eastern Australia. Asian and Pacific island immigration also present junction points for imperialism and nationalism. For example, could Chinese be properly excluded from the colonies? Again, if the nation was to be white, was it also to be masculinist? Within the broad matter of the male definition of the nation in contemporary literature and the useful criticisms made of that, the position of Governors in accepting or rejecting divorce laws and exercising mercy for rapists provided points of debate.

The great strikes and depression, like an earthquake, revealed the strata involved. If capital flows were at the centre of the imperial relationship so far as the Australian colonies were concerned (Chapters 9-11), then their cessation could not help but have a major effect. Bankers and politicians were among those who cautioned that the early 1890s were not the time to speak of Australian nationalism. Labour, too, experienced a transition. In 1889 the Australian unions were at the forefront of a great public effort to support the London dockers' strike. They sent money and threatened industrial action in support of the poor of the mother country. This was not an isolated action, but was part of an effort to apply pressure at both ends of the major commercial connexion. The idea of a labour federation between Britain and Australia gave quite a different aspect to imperial closer union. It became important for capital that there was not sufficient reciprocal support for the Australian maritime strike of 1890 to make that a success. Some support came from British unions, but not enough to save the action. The pleasure expressed in the British financial press was understandable. Thereafter, it became desirable to redefine the imperial relationship, so that some concessions were made to the nationalism of the emerging political Labor parties, but the permanence of the connexion and the protection of British capital was assured.

Chapters 12-13 speak of the refounding of the Australian state. Society had been altered by the changes of the early 1890s. The blunting of the Labour challenge and the renewed concern about Asian immigration or conquest, now concentrated on Japan, helped lay the basis for a federation quite easily accommodated within the British empire. The engineering by Joseph Chamberlain, the British Colonial Secretary, of Australian participation in the South African war in 1899 was of a piece with his views on imperial federation. In that way the Commonwealth was born in imperial khaki.

Finally, Chapters 14-15 offer perspectives on the issue. Firstly, they trace in nineteenth-century historical writing a nationalist strand, in all its variety, and at the end of the century, the invention of an imperial historiography. This has to be understood in terms of the social structure of the two countries. Secondly, a model is advanced of an imperialism which comprehends the position of the Australian colonies as engaged both in the process of expansion of the empire and its consolidation. But, 'the most important social and economic divisions defining development and underdevelopment run through nations rather than between them', so it is important to consider the domestic considerations in both Britain and the colonies.⁵

In sum, the book suggests that imperialism be taken seriously as an element in late nineteenth-century Australia. The British government was a player in the rivalries between

and within the different colonies. It was attempting to manipulate the situation through covert action. This was recognised and hence the struggles over apparently small incidents such as the granting of honours. On the other side, the Australian colonies had their part to play in British imperialism. Australians or Anglo-Australians, both in Britain and Australia, worked to encourage imperialism. We are not dealing with national entities alone, although they have their reality, but with fragments of them, both regional and social. A great deal of British capital was borrowed and the profits derived from Australian workers went largely to Britain. There was not the local economic strength to support the colonies in the depression of the 1890s.

The nationalism of the 1880s was to some extent blunted in the 1890s and the groundwork laid for what was to be termed, in the twentieth century, independent Australian Britons. The British empire accommodated a degree of nationalism—mateship as a bond of empire—but it was a nationalism based on the dispossession of the Aborigines, a sub-imperialism in the Pacific and a strong masculinism. The empire might thus be thought of as having weakened Britain, in postponing its adjustment to the realities of the late nineteenth century, and weakened Australia as contriving the formation of the Commonwealth within a debilitating imperial framework.

Notes

1. E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875–1914*, p. 61.
2. W. J. Hudson and M. P. Sharp, *Australian Independence*; D. Denoon, *Settler Capitalism*; K. Tsokhas, *Markets, Money and Empire*.
3. L. Davis and R. Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire*; P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British expansion overseas'; A. Porter, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism' and empire: the British experience since 1750?'
4. M. J. Daunton, ' "Gentlemanly Capitalism" and British industry 1820-1914', pp. 148 and 119-58; Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution*, pp. 190-2 and ch. 7. Cain and Hopkins have developed their argument in *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914*. It is a major work which touches this study at a number of points – Chapter 8 is particularly relevant—but it arrived too late to be fully incorporated in the text.
5. Warwick Armstrong and John Bradbury, 'Industrialisation and class structure in Australia, Canada and Argentina: 1870-1980'. Terry Irving, 'Society and the Language of Class' in Neville Meaney, ed., *Under New Heavens*.

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Luke Trainor

Excerpt

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P A R T I

The Years
1880–1886

2

THE SEARCH FOR A SAFE FEDERATION

Federalism, as John Kendle in *Ireland and the Federal Solution* has pointed out, attracted a great deal of attention in the nineteenth century. Its appeal derived largely from the American model with legislative powers divided between the centre and the regions. After 1871, the apparent success of the German federation strengthened the appeal of the notion in some quarters. Its benefits and disadvantages were publicly debated in the 1880s. In Britain, reservations were expressed about its being compatible with traditional ideas of sovereignty. Could the rule of the United Kingdom be at the same time united and yet divided?

The debate involved some of the best legal and political scholars—A. V. Dicey, James Bryce, E. A. Freeman—but should not be seen as simply academic controversy. The question of who was to rule was of pressing political importance. For example, the issue of Home Rule for Ireland was, in one aspect, a federal matter. Could power be devolved to a Dublin parliament while still maintaining the integrity of the Union? Beyond that there were still wider issues of the economic and social futures of the people involved. The debates and manoeuvres, the marshalling of arguments about the participants, the divisions of powers between the legislatures and the character of the federation, all had behind them major interests of identity and economic growth. Germany after 1871, for example, as a federation meant the creation of a great market area in central Europe as well as a major power with the seeds of a vibrant nationalism.

Of the colonial prototypes, Canada was the most commonly cited, although South Africa provided both an example and a warning. By 1881, Childers, British Secretary for War and formerly a colonial minister, drew the lesson in a letter to New South Wales Premier, Henry Parkes.

I have always felt that the impulse must come from Australia not from this country. If it were supposed that public men here had some special object in promoting Federation in Australia its prospects would be damaged; it is for this reason that those who would be disposed to further the movement have been generally silent on this side. Our recent total failure in S. Africa is a decided warning...¹

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During the years 1880–86 there was considerable British public support for federation of the Australian colonies provided it was fashioned on a basis to ensure the permanent unity of those colonies with Britain. More particularly, the Australian Federal Council, which first sat in February 1886, was formed in response to British needs. It was not foisted on the colonies by a British conspiracy but the imperial government was the key player in its creation. For some British observers colonial federations could be the building blocks by which an imperial federation was created; a belief that the Imperial Federation League, founded in 1884, was to espouse. Thus, federation was a doctrine to be applied to specific areas in the empire, and also to the empire as a whole with perhaps colonial delegates serving on some central body in Britain. Federation involved, on a minimum definition, some fixed division of powers between central and regional governments. In fact, imperial federation was used to mean the closer permanent union of the empire. That was the announced primary object of the Imperial Federation League and its emergence in this period was intended as a clear rejection of the supposed readiness of the followers of the Liberal leader, Gladstone, to cast the colonies adrift. The League, however, refused to tie itself to any among the wide range of suggestions for ways of securing this end.

Some of the support for imperial federation rubbed off on Australian federation, but that, too, was ambiguous. It might be a prelude to separation from the empire or a step to closer imperial union. In this way it could straddle British party lines: a Liberal speaker could support Australian federation as a preliminary to devolving expense and responsibility (for example, for the South Pacific and its defence), or a Conservative could urge it as a precedent for all the empire to cluster together on an altered constitutional

basis, say acquiring representation in the House of Lords, to strengthen British prestige and dominance.²

Federation may thus be seen as a meeting point of nationalism and imperialism; both futures seemed to be implicit in it and that ambiguity helps explain the divided and unsure response in both countries. A question about British or Australian responses to the prospect of federation always presumes the question of the sort of federation which was envisaged. *The Times* (London) echoed something of this difficulty. It asked 'Will the outcome of the Bill be a great Australia, capable of standing by itself and seeking so to stand? Or does it contain the seeds of a still wider federation, of a



1 Britain, the four nations

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10 THE YEARS 1880–1886



2 Australia, c. 1900

union of all our colonies with one another and with ourselves?' Was, in other words, the future to be separation or federation?³

Federation, imperial or Australian, did not attract a lively colonial following in the early 1880s. But it seemed certain that federation would involve a free-market or a protectionist future and that brought in train matters of employment, wages, conditions and markets. The contrast between free-trade New South Wales and protectionist Victoria was not as clear as that presented by contemporaries, but there was such a marshalling of interest groups in the colonies behind these banners that it was difficult to conceive of federation without an initial raising, if not resolution, of this conflict. Mercer, a Colonial Office clerk, repeated this conventional wisdom in 1882, but the permanent head, Robert Herbert, took the view that it was quite possible to have a federation with each State reserving its own tariff. He thought that the best way to get a uniform tariff for Australia might be to establish other joint institutions first. Although not ripe at the time, this bud of the later Federal Council was to burst in the following spring.⁴

Several reasons might be suggested why British support for an appropriate form of federation—that is, one not threatening to the imperial connexion—remained high.

Firstly, there was the acknowledged importance of Australia as a home for British investment. Its popularity greatly increased in these years. Lord Derby, who was a rich landowner and Secretary of State for the Colonies, had some £50 000 invested in Australian, chiefly New South Wales, stock.⁵ Secondly, unified communications, exemplified in the junction of the New South Wales and Victorian railway lines at Albury in 1883, and a unified market promised the economic development benefits which had followed other federations. British companies established there, British shipping and insurance, British industry through cheap food and raw materials—all these could be expected to benefit. The threat that might be posed by Australian competition behind protective tariffs did not weaken the aim of federation but only made its protagonists more zealous for the British hand to be on the tiller.

A third consideration fostering support in Britain for what were claimed as federal measures was military and naval. One of the few shared conclusions of the many defence reports by British officers visiting Australia was the need for a co-operative intercolonial approach, a system of federal defence, as it was called. Finally, official Britain could not help but be attracted by the enlargement of view which federation might bring; the possibility of better leadership, the lessening of the frequent intercolonial wrangles (although the wrangles facilitated playing off one colony against another) and the move towards the Canadian position. Derby noted in his diary on 4 February 1885 that he saw little of Sir Charles Tupper, the Canadian High Commissioner: 'indeed he has nothing to come about, for we have no question unsettled with Canada'. Here was a lurking office ideal—to so arrange business that there was no business, to ensure that areas of conflict diminished. This is not to say that the political chiefs in Britain were tireless in their pursuit of Australian federation. '[T]he cause [had] not yet been discovered which could evoke heat in Lord Derby.'⁶ But they and permanent officials were prepared to foster it, although trying to avoid being seen too obviously to do so.

Origins in the Early 1880s

In 1880–81 the planets seemed to be in conjunction. In Britain, the new Liberal government reawoke old concerns. Sir Daniel Cooper, a rich Anglo-Australian, picked up a proposal of Henry Parkes for Australian closer union and produced a pamphlet on Australian and imperial federation. He wrote Parkes:

By putting federation strongly to the front and impressing people that it will give greater strength to the Empire, the Colonies will take a more important position in the estimation of the public and it will stop any movement for disintegration. The present political party when last in office gave indications in favour of disintegration but during the general elections Lord Hartington and others deemed that such was not the case. I therefore think I shall pin them to this opinion by now bringing the matter before the public.

He had in mind that the question would arise on the Carnarvon Commission on colonial defence, then sitting, for 'if the general public came to know that imperial federation will give greater strength to the Empire at a smaller cost than at present it will become highly popular'.⁷