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CHAPTER I

Introduction: state and empire in British history

... the word, *empire*, conveys an idea of a vast territory, composed of various people; whereas that of *kingdom*, implies, one more bounded; and intimates the unity of that nation, of which it is formed.¹

By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the British Empire comprehended the United Kingdom of Great Britain, Ireland, the islands of the Caribbean and the British mainland colonies of North America.² The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by a common religion and by the Royal Navy. The gentle, but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their free, white inhabitants enjoyed and produced the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with a decent reverence. The Hanoverian kings appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and devolved on their parliaments all the executive powers of government. During a crucial period of almost fourscore years (1688–1760), the public administration was conducted by a succession of Whig politicians. It is the design of this, and of the succeeding chapters, to describe the ideological origins of their empire, though not to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall: the American Revolution, which dismembered the British Atlantic Empire, lies beyond the immediate scope of this book.

The history of the rise, decline and fall of the British Empire has most often been told as the story of an empire whose foundations lay in India during the second half of the eighteenth century.³ That empire formally

¹ John Trusler, *The Difference, Between Words, Esteemed Synonymous, in the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1766), II, 15.

² C. H. Firth, “The British Empire”, *Scottish Historical Review*, 15 (1918), 185–9; James Truslow Adams, “On the Term ‘British Empire’”, *American Historical Review*, 27 (1922), 485–9.

³ From J. Holland Rose, A. P. Newton and E. A. Benians (gen. eds.), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, 9 vols. (Cambridge, 1929–61) to Wm. Roger Louis (gen. ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1998–99).

encompassed parts of South Asia, Australasia, Africa and the Americas. Its ascent began with British victory at the battle of Plassey in 1757, continued almost unabated in South Asia and the Pacific until the end of the Napoleonic Wars, resumed momentum in the latter half of the nineteenth century during the European ‘scramble for Africa’, and then unravelled definitively during and after the Second World War. William Pitt was its midwife, Lord Mountbatten its sexton and Winston Churchill its chief mourner in Britain. Its ghost lives on in the form of the Commonwealth; its sole remains are the handful of United Kingdom Overseas Territories, from Bermuda to the Pitcairn Islands.⁴ In this account, the American Revolution and its aftermath divided the two (supposedly distinct) Empires, chronologically, geographically and institutionally. The Peace of Paris that ended the Seven Years War in 1763 marked the end of French imperial power in North America and South Asia. Twenty years later, in 1783, the Peace of Paris by which Britain acknowledged the independence of the United States of America marked the beginnings of a newly configured British Atlantic Empire, still including the Caribbean islands and the remaining parts of British North America; it also signalled the British Empire’s decisive ‘swing to the east’ into the Indian and Pacific oceans.⁵ Historians of the eighteenth-century British Empire have protested against any easy separation between the ‘First’ and ‘Second’ British Empires on the grounds that the two overlapped in time, that they shared common purposes and personnel, and that the differences between the maritime, commercial colonies of settlement in North America and the military, territorial colonies of conquest in India have been crudely overdrawn.⁶ Nevertheless, among historians, and more generally in the popular imagination, the British Empire still denotes that ‘Second’ Empire, which was founded in the late eighteenth century and whose character distinguished it decisively from the ‘Old Colonial System’ of the British Atlantic world that had gone before it.⁷

⁴ For instance, most recently, in Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (London, 1994), Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience, From 1765 to the Present* (London, 1996) and P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1996); exceptions are Angus Calder, *Revolutionary Empire: The Rise of the English-Speaking Peoples from the Fifteenth Century to the 1780s* (London, 1981) and T. O. Lloyd, *The British Empire 1558–1983* (Oxford, 1984).

⁵ V. T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763–1793*, 2 vols. (London, 1952–64).

⁶ Peter Marshall, ‘The First and Second British Empires: A Question of Demarcation’, *History*, 49 (1964), 13–23; Philip Lawson, ‘The Missing Link: The Imperial Dimension in Understanding Hanoverian Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), 747–51; P. J. Marshall, ‘Britain and the World in the Eighteenth Century: 1, Reshaping the Empire’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 8 (1998), 1–18.

⁷ G. L. Beer, *The Origins of the British Colonial System 1578–1660* (London, 1908).

The conflation of British Imperial history with the history of the Second British Empire has encouraged the separation of the history of Britain and Ireland from the history of the Empire itself.⁸ ‘British’ history is assumed to mean ‘domestic’ history; Imperial history implies extra-territorial history. This distinction was at least understandable, if not defensible, as long as the Empire was assumed to be divided from the metropole by vast physical distances, to be overwhelmingly distinct in its racial composition, and to be dependent upon, rather than formally equal with, Britain itself. The attributed character of the Second British Empire – as an empire founded on military conquest, racial subjection, economic exploitation and territorial expansion – rendered it incompatible with metropolitan norms of liberty, equality and the rule of law, and demanded that the Empire be exoticised and further differentiated from domestic history. The purported character of the First British Empire – as ‘for the most part a maritime empire, an oceanic empire of trade and settlement, not an empire of conquest; an empire defended by ships, not troops’⁹ – assimilated it more closely to the domestic histories of the Three Kingdoms by making it the outgrowth of British norms, exported and fostered by metropolitan migrants. The revolutionary crisis in the British Atlantic world, between 1763 and 1783, revealed the practical and theoretical limits of any such assimilation. Thereafter, the former colonies became part of the history of the United States. This in turn facilitated the identification of the history of the British Empire with the history of the Second Empire and fostered the continuing disjuncture between ‘British’ and ‘Imperial’ histories.

The Ideological Origins of the British Empire attempts to reintegrate the history of the British Empire with the history of early-modern Britain on the ground of intellectual history. This approach faces its own difficulties, in that the history of political thought has more often treated the history of ideas of the state than it has the concepts of empire, at least as that term has been vulgarly understood.¹⁰ Political thought is, by definition, the

⁸ A note on terminology: ‘Britain’ is used either as a geographical expression, to refer to the island encompassing England, Wales and Scotland, or as a shorthand political term, to denote the United Kingdom of Great Britain created by the Anglo-Scottish union of 1707; ‘Britain and Ireland’ is taken to be synonymous with the ‘Three Kingdoms’ of England, Scotland and Ireland throughout the period before 1707. ‘British Isles’ is only used when it expresses the vision of a particular author – for example, Edmund Spenser; ‘British’ is likewise not held to include ‘Irish’, except when particular authors employed it otherwise.

⁹ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, *The New Cambridge History of India*, III.4 (Cambridge, 1994), 4.

¹⁰ For the emergence of concepts of the state in competition with ideologies of empire see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978), I, 8–12; James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge, 1995), 15–17.

history of the *polis*, the self-contained, firmly bounded, sovereign and integrated community that preceded and sometimes shadowed the history of empire and that paralleled and ultimately overtook that history during the age of the great nation-states. For this reason, the British Empire has not been an actor in the history of political thought, any more than political thought has generally been hospitable to considering the ideologies of empire. The very pursuit of an intellectual history for the British Empire has been dismissed by historians who have described seventeenth-century arguments regarding the British Empire as ‘intellectually of no . . . commanding calibre’, and have counselled that ‘[t]o look for any significant intellectual or ideological contribution to the ordering of empire in the first two decades of George III’s reign would seem at first sight to be a barren task’.¹¹ This is symptomatic of a more lasting unwillingness to consider ideologies of empire as part of political theory or the history of political thought.¹² However, the study of imperial ideologies can clarify the limits of political theory studied on the unexamined principle that it encompasses solely the theory of the state and its ideological predecessors.¹³ It is therefore essential to recover the intellectual history of the British Empire from the ‘fit of absence of mind’ into which it has fallen.¹⁴

This study understands the term ‘ideology’ in two senses: first, in the programmatic sense of a systematic model of how society functions and second, as a world-view which is perceived as contestable by those who do not share it.¹⁵ This latter sense does not imply that such an ideology should necessarily be exposed as irrational because it can be identified as simply the expression of sectional interests; rather, it implies that contemporaries may have seen such an interconnected set of beliefs as both

¹¹ Klaus E. Knorr, *British Colonial Theories 1570–1850* (Toronto, 1944), 62; P. J. Marshall, ‘Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 15 (1987), 105.

¹² Though for early attempts to consider this problem, from the dying decades of the British Empire, see Sir Ernest Barker, *The Ideas and Ideals of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1941), George Bennett (ed.), *The Concept of Empire: Burke to Attlee, 1774–1947* (London, 1953) and Eric Stokes, *The Political Ideas of English Imperialism: An Inaugural Lecture Given in the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland* (Oxford, 1960).

¹³ Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, 58–98.

¹⁴ Compare Peter N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1994); Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500 – c. 1800* (New Haven, 1995); David Armitage (ed.), *Theories of Empire, 1450–1800* (Aldershot, 1998).

¹⁵ Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge, 1981), 10; Keith Michael Baker, ‘On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution’, in Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), 17–18.

argumentatively flawed and compromised by needs which they did not share. This spirit of ideological critique could see such beliefs as rationally indefensible, or even false, just because they answered to a particular set of needs; more importantly, rational disagreement about the status of those beliefs rendered them the product of contemporary political and philosophical argument. The purpose of this study is therefore not to expose beliefs about the British Empire as either true or false, but rather to show the ways in which the constitutive elements of various conceptions of the British Empire arose in the competitive context of political argument. It deploys resources from a wider tradition of political thought, stretching back to classical sources in ancient Greece and, especially, Rome, but also encompassing contemporary Spain and the United Provinces, as part of a wider European dialogue within which the various empires were defined and defended.¹⁶ Its purpose is therefore not to claim that the origins of the British Empire can be found only in ideology; rather, it seeks to locate the origins of the ideological definition of empire in Britain, Ireland and the wider Atlantic world.

Any search for origins is, of course, fraught with a basic conceptual ambiguity. An origin can be either a beginning or a cause, a logical and chronological *terminus a quo*, or the starting-point from which a chain of consequences derives. ‘In popular usage, an origin is a beginning which explains’, warned Marc Bloch. ‘Worse still, a beginning which is a complete explanation. There lies the ambiguity, there the danger!’ To discover the etymology of a word does nothing to explain its present meaning, though the gap between its etymological root and its current usage can be historically revealing, but only if approached contextually. ‘In a word, a historical phenomenon can never be understood apart from its moment in time.’¹⁷ Similarly, the context within which a concept emerges does not determine its future usage, though the history of its usage across time will reveal a great deal about the history of the later contexts within which it was deployed. The origins of a concept, as of any other object of historical inquiry, are not necessarily connected to any later outcome, causally or otherwise: actiology is not simply teleology in reverse. Conversely, present usage or practice offers no sure guide to the origins of a concept or activity.

No matter how perfectly you have understood the *usefulness* of any physiological organ (or legal institution, social custom, political usage, art form or religious

¹⁶ On which see generally Pagden, *Lords of All the World*.

¹⁷ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York, 1953), 30, 32–3, 35.

rite) you have not yet thereby grasped how it emerged . . . the whole history of a 'thing,' an organ, a tradition, can to this extent be a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations, the causes of which need not be connected even amongst themselves, but rather sometimes just follow and replace one another at random.

Meaning cannot therefore be identified with purpose, least of all in the case of a concept, of which '[t]he form is fluid, the "meaning" even more so'.¹⁸

Confusion between origins as beginnings and origins as causes has bedevilled the history of the British Empire at least since the eighteenth century. The chronological origins of the British Empire have most often been traced back to the reign of Elizabeth I, and hence to the maritime exploits of her English sailors. This chronology defined the Empire as Protestant, *Anglo-British*, benign and extra-European, because it originated in post-Reformation, specifically English activities, was the product of navies not armies, and was conducted across vast oceanic expanses, far from the metropolis.¹⁹ This was the vision of imperial origins emblematised in Millais's 'The Boyhood of Raleigh' (1870), itself inspired by the painter's reading of J. A. Froude's essay on the Elizabethan sea-dogs, 'England's Forgotten Worthies' (1852).²⁰ More recent historians have espoused a similar chronology but for different reasons, by finding the origins of British imperialism in English colonialism on the Celtic crescent surrounding the English core-state. This was still an *Anglo-British* imperialism, though it was neither benign nor exotic. External 'imperialism' was the offspring of 'internal colonialism', as the English developed their ideologies of racial supremacy, political hegemony, cultural superiority and divinely appointed civilising mission in their relations with a 'Celtic fringe', beginning in Ireland in the sixteenth century.²¹ Maintaining the content, but disputing the chronology, an alternative aetiology for English imperialism – defined by its supremacist racism, its crusading national identity and its ideology of conquest – has instead been traced to the twelfth century, and the

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethel (Cambridge, 1994), 55.

¹⁹ Cynthia Fansler Behrman, *Victorian Myths of the Sea* (Athens, Ohio, 1977), 30–7, 113–16.

²⁰ [J. A. Froude,] 'England's Forgotten Worthies', *The Westminster Review*, n.s. 2, 1 (July 1852), 29; M. H. Spielman, *Millais and His Works* (Edinburgh, 1898), 124; John Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981), 231–2.

²¹ Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (London, 1975); Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 1985); Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (Cambridge, 1989), 106–27.

attempted anglicisation of Ireland, Scotland and Wales chronicled in the works of William of Malmesbury and Gerald of Wales.²² This thesis in turn disrupts any continuity between state-formation and empire-building by making English imperialism a solely archipelagic phenomenon whose continuities with extra-British empire-building were tenuous and analogical. In reaction, other historians, attempting to save the chronology of origins but extend its scope forward from the sixteenth century, have ‘unearthed in protestant religious consciousness a root, perhaps even the taproot, of English imperialism’;²³ even more precisely, the ‘origins of Anglo-British imperialism’ have been located in the Anglo-Scottish propaganda wars of the mid-sixteenth century.²⁴

This study reconsiders both the traditional and more recent accounts of the ideological origins of the British Empire by tracing the histories both of the concept of the British Empire and of the different conceptions of that empire from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century.²⁵ The ‘concept’ of the British Empire means the idea that an identifiable political community existed to which the term ‘empire’ could be fittingly applied and which was recognisably British, rather than, for example, Roman, French or English. It will be argued that the emergence of the concept of the ‘British Empire’ as a political community encompassing England and Wales, Scotland, Protestant Ireland, the British islands of the Caribbean and the mainland colonies of North America, was long drawn out, and only achieved by the late seventeenth century at the earliest. This was not because the conceptual language of Britishness was lacking; rather, it had been used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to describe less expansive communities within the Three Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland. Nor was it because the language of ‘empire’ was absent from British political discourse: it too was used in more restricted senses. Only in the first half of the eighteenth century, it will be argued, did the two languages coincide to provide the conception of that larger community within

²² John Gillingham, ‘Images of Ireland 1170–1600: The Origins of English Imperialism’, *History Today*, 37, 2 (Feb. 1987), 16–22; Gillingham, ‘The Beginnings of English Imperialism’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 5 (1992), 392–409; Rees Davies, ‘The English State and the “Celtic” Peoples 1100–1400’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 6 (1993), 1–14.

²³ Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1988), 5.

²⁴ Roger A. Mason, ‘The Scottish Reformation and the Origins of Anglo-British Imperialism’, in Mason (ed.), *Scots and Britons: Scottish Political Thought and the Union of 1603* (Cambridge, 1994), 161–86.

²⁵ For the distinction between ‘concepts’ and ‘conceptions’ see, for example, Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, rev. edn (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 134–6.

which the Three Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland and the English-speaking islands, colonies, plantations and territories of the western hemisphere were all members – albeit, unequal members – of a single political body known as the ‘British Empire’.

The unifying concept of the British Empire left generous room for different conceptions of that Empire. By the 1730s, an integrated concept of the British Empire could be found in the political writings of creole elites and imperial officials throughout the British Atlantic world. It was yoked to a particular conception of the Empire, espoused in particular by oppositional politicians within Britain, that became dominant (though it did not remain unchallenged). According to this conception, the British Empire had certain characteristics which distinguished it both from past empires and from contemporary imperial polities such as the Spanish Monarchy. Its inhabitants believed it to be primarily Protestant, despite the variety even of Protestant denominations that could be found within the Three Kingdoms and among the islands and colonies; most importantly, it was not Catholic, despite the obvious presence of a persistent Catholic majority in Ireland and of other pockets of Roman Catholicism, for instance in Maryland.

The British Empire was an arena of hemispheric and international trade. Its character was therefore commercial. The attachment to commerce – and the means by which commerce connected the various parts of the Empire to one another – made the British Empire different from its predecessors or its rivals, most of which (it was believed) had been integrated by force, or had been operated more for reasons of power (often over subject peoples) than plenty. For the far-flung British Empire to be successful in its commerce, it had also to be maritime. The British dominions were not all contiguous, and the richest parts of the Empire, such as Barbados and Jamaica, were separated both from the Three Kingdoms and from the mainland colonies by vast oceanic expanses. The waters around Britain itself had always been defended by the Royal Navy, and a series of naval myths provided the legendary foundations for such maritime supremacy. Protestantism, oceanic commerce and mastery of the seas provided bastions to protect the freedom of inhabitants of the British Empire. That freedom found its institutional expression in Parliament, the law, property and rights, all of which were exported throughout the British Atlantic world. Such freedom also allowed the British, uniquely, to combine the classically incompatible ideals of liberty and empire. In sum, the British Empire was, above all and beyond all other such polities, Protestant, commercial, maritime and free.

The concept of a British Empire had its roots within the Three Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland; however, to become elaborated in its later, more expansive form, it had to overcome some formidable conceptual and practical obstacles. The collision between an Erastian English church and a Presbyterian Scottish kirk obviated the emergence of a pan-British ecclesiology and exacerbated the denominational diversity of the British Atlantic world. The British Empire therefore had no unitary theological foundation, though the common Protestantism of the majority of its inhabitants distinguished it sufficiently from the Spanish and French monarchies. Secular political thought defined the community in terms that could accommodate the contiguous territories of a composite monarchy and even encompass an ethnic definition of community that extended to Ireland, but nonetheless proved resistant to imagining colonies and factories as members of the polity before the rise of mercantilist thought in the period after the Restoration. Political economy in turn redefined the nature of British maritime dominion, which under the Stuarts had implied exclusive British *imperium* solely over home waters; this was replaced by a conception of *mare liberum* on the oceans which underpinned arguments for the free circulation of trade around the Atlantic world.

The British Atlantic world could therefore only be conceived of as a single political community once the intellectual limits to its growth had been overcome in an era of expanding commerce and reform in colonial government. The impetus of political contention helped to generate a distinctive ideology for the Empire, but only once a pan-Atlantic conception of the British Empire had been generated by a cadre of provincials and imperial officials beyond the metropolis itself in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. That conception sprang initially from Britain's imperial provinces; when metropolitans took it up later, theirs would be the derivative discourse, not the colonists'. The ideological definition of the British state, and the conceptualisation of its relationship with its dependencies, was therefore neither a solely metropolitan nor an exclusively provincial achievement: it was a shared conception of the British Empire that could describe a community and provide a distinguishable character for it. However, the instabilities which marked both the concept and the conception from their origins in debates within the Three Kingdoms would ultimately create the ideological conditions for the debate preceding and surrounding the American Revolution. The ideological origins of the British Empire also constituted the ideological origins of the American

Revolution;²⁶ the decline, fall and reconstruction of the British Atlantic Empire can therefore be traced back to the limitations and instabilities of the British state.

‘[H]istory devises reason why the lessons of past empire do not apply to ours’, remarked J. A. Hobson in 1902.²⁷ The objects of his criticism were those nineteenth-century English historians who denied the British Empire any origins or antecedents at all and thereby left it suspended, statically, outside history and beyond the reach of the conventional compulsions of imperial decline and fall (or expansion and overstretch). Hobson accurately diagnosed the fact that most of the major modes within which British history has been written since the nineteenth century had been inhospitable to Imperial history. This was partly the result of the hegemony of English history and historians, for whom England stood proxy for the United Kingdom, and who maintained a willed forgetfulness about the rest of Britain, Ireland and the Empire.²⁸ Their grand narratives produced an English exceptionalism that sustained an insular account of national history and proved increasingly impregnable to the history of the Empire. For example, the historiography of English religion told the history of the Church *in* England as the story of the Church *of* England, a story that might begin with St Augustine of Canterbury, Bede, or at least Wycliffe, but that found its lasting incarnation in the Erastian Church founded under Henry VIII at the English Reformation.²⁹ That Church had, of course, expanded across the globe to create a worldwide communion, but so had the Dissenting and Nonconformist denominations. The Church of England never became a unified imperial Church, least of all in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the existence of discrete Church establishments in Scotland, Ireland and Wales meant that the English Church remained but one ecclesiastical body within a more extensive Anglo-British state (as constituted by the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707). English ecclesiastical history could thus claim a lengthy pedigree, and even a providential charter for insularity, but it did little to encourage an ampler imperial perspective.

²⁶ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

²⁷ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, 3rd edn. (London, 1938), 221.

²⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of the Unknown Subject’, *American Historical Review*, 87 (1982), 311–14.

²⁹ Michael Bentley, ‘The British State and its Historiography’, in Wim Blockmans and Jean-Philippe Genet (eds.), *Visions sur le développement des états européens: théories et historiographies de l’état moderne* (Rome, 1993), 154, 162–4.