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978-0-521-84770-4 - Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Career-
ing in the Long Nineteenth Century

Edited by David Lambert and Alan Lester

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

*Imperial spaces, imperial subjects**David Lambert and Alan Lester*

This book is about some of the ways that individual people made the British empire, and some of the ways that the empire made them. During the ‘long nineteenth century’, from the War of American Independence to the First World War, the expanding British empire presented Britons with vastly increased opportunities to settle in or visit other lands. Much has been written about those who carved new lives for themselves by settling permanently within particular colonies. Initially these emigrants reinvented themselves as various kinds of colonial Britons, but subsequently, especially from the late nineteenth century, most of their descendants constructed new national identities – for example as Australians, South Africans, Canadians or New Zealanders – that were distanced both metaphorically and literally from Britain itself. Much has also been written about Britons who travelled through colonial places, reporting their observations and impressions in popular travelogues or creating exciting and exotic narratives of exploration. A number of authors have demonstrated that such narratives were influential in constructing the geographical imaginations of those who had stayed ‘at home’ in Britain itself.¹

Many Britons can be considered in a different category, however, from either those who settled in or those who travelled through the empire. These were men and women who dwelt for extended periods in one colony before moving on to dwell in others, developing what we might

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¹ C. Hall, ‘“Going-a-trolloping”: imperial man travels the empire’, in C. Midgley (ed.), *Gender and imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 180–99; F. Driver, *Geography militant: cultures of exploration and empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); D. Clayton, *Islands of truth: the imperial fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

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call 'imperial careers'. Within each of the colonies they inhabited, these people had opportunities to transcend their initial impressions, to insinuate themselves into personal, business, official, religious and friendship networks. They came, as they saw it, to 'know' the local 'native' peoples, and to articulate more considered and comparative reflections on the colonial societies in which they had dwelt. As Doreen Massey points out, '[a]rriving in a new place means joining up with, somehow linking into, the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made'.² The majority of individuals who feature in this book did so more frequently than most settlers, and they did so in more profound, more interactive, more sustained, and often more personally transformative ways than did the travellers and explorers about whom so much has been written. Their imperial careers are worthy of further study not necessarily because imperial careerists' own comparative insights give us a more objective view of colonial relations, but because their life histories – indeed, their life geographies³ – constituted meaningful connections across the empire in their own right. And these connections were one kind among many which facilitated the continual reformulation of imperial discourses, practices and culture.

Although the individuals examined in this book are not intended to be in any sense representative of those who careered across the British empire, they do span a good breadth of gender, class, religious and generational subject positions. All but one was 'white', reflecting in part the differential, racialised mobilities of colonial citizens and subjects, and in part the availability of sources. They were English, Scottish, Irish, American and West Indian. They consist of four colonial governors, two governors' wives, two missionaries, a nurse/entrepreneur, a poet/civil servant and a mercenary. Some were motivated to move between colonial sites by profit, some by religion and some by a sense of duty. In different ways, each colonial life provides insight not only into the heterogeneity of the empire and the multiple subject positions that arose from this 'variegated terrain',⁴ but also how ideas, practices and identities developed *trans-imperially* as they moved from one imperial site to another.

Telling stories about people who moved across, and dwelt in, different parts of the empire during the course of their lives challenges the structure

² D. Massey, *For space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 119.

³ S. Daniels and C. Nash, 'Life paths: geography and biography', *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004), p. 450.

⁴ G. Whitlock, *The intimate empire: reading women's autobiography* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 2.

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of the national archives upon which its very pursuit is necessarily based. As Ann Laura Stoler recognises,

research that begins with people's movements rather than with fixed polities opens up more organic histories that are not compelled by originary narratives designed to show the 'natural' teleology of future nations, later republics, and future states.

The individual trajectories traced in this book 'ran across and athwart state-archived paper trails'.⁵ The narratives of the subjects' lives knit together markedly different places, weaving between distanced cultural configurations. This volume therefore seeks to introduce a more explicit discussion of the complex spatiality of empire, as well as of imperial subjectivities.

IMPERIAL SPACES

From the beginnings of British imperial history-writing at the end of the nineteenth century, the differences between spaces and places, particularly 'metropolitan' or 'core' ones, and 'colonial' or 'peripheral' ones, have been absolutely fundamental to scholars' imagination of the British empire. And yet these spatial concepts have rarely been examined explicitly.⁶ Between the 1950s and 1980s, the most influential model for understanding Britain's nineteenth-century imperial expansion was that of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher. Robinson and Gallagher argued that the mid-Victorian British government favoured a low-cost 'imperialism of free trade' over the intricacies of formal empire, but that this preference was often subverted by events on the 'periphery' of empire. The crucial figures deciding when formal intervention was necessary to protect British interests were government officials in the colonial service. These men (and they were all men) shared a common educational background and worldview that Robinson and Gallagher described as the 'official mind', and many of their decisions were taken with the potential for indigenous collaboration with British administrations in mind.⁷

⁵ A. L. Stoler, 'Tense and tender ties: the politics of comparison in North American history and (post) colonial studies', *The Journal of American History* 88, 3 (2004), p. 852.

⁶ For an extended discussion of the spatiality of imperial history, see A. Lester, 'Imperial circuits and networks: geographies of the British empire', *History Compass* 3, 189 (2005), pp. 1–18.

⁷ J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, 'The imperialism of free trade', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 6, 1 (1953), pp. 1–15; R. Robinson and J. Gallagher with A. Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The official mind of imperialism*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), p. xvii; R. Robinson, 'Non-European foundations of European imperialism', in E. R. Owen and B. Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the theory of imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 117–42.

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In linking economic and political motivations, and explaining their intersection within the culture of the ‘official mind’, Robinson and Gallagher’s theory inscribed an implicit geographical imagination on their discipline. Imperial historians’ role was to study a world of ‘core’ British metropolitan interests interacting with ‘local/peripheral’ crises that were generated through the actions of indigenous peoples and rival imperial powers, and to reconstruct the ways in which the ‘official mind’ would have understood this world. In spatial terms, theirs was a centripetal, or, as they called it, ‘ex-centric’, analysis, since expansionary initiative moved from the colonial ‘edge’ of the empire to the British ‘centre’.⁸

In the early 1990s, though, a new integrative model of imperial expansion and decline was formulated. In place of Robinson and Gallagher’s centripetal framework, the work of P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins was based upon a more explicitly centrifugal sense of imperial space. For them, ‘gentlemanly capitalism’, with its logic structured above all in the City of London, was the driving force of interaction between Britain and its colonies. Cain and Hopkins asserted that ‘[p]utting the metropolitan economy back at the centre of the analysis ... makes it possible to establish a new framework for interpreting Britain’s historic role as a world power’.⁹ Britain’s imperial expansion was not so much the product of an ‘official mind’, as it was the result of the work performed by ‘gentlemen’ operating in the financial and service sectors of the City of London, but maintaining close connections with government. Cain and Hopkins were confident that ‘geographical considerations, like the “peripheral thesis” have their place in the story, but only within the context of impulses emanating from the centre’.¹⁰

‘Geographical considerations’, however, continued to trouble imperial historians after Cain and Hopkins had sought to lay them to rest. With their metropolitan focus, and the consequent marginalisation of both British and indigenous peoples in the colonies themselves, Cain and Hopkins still did not address the longstanding problem of how to write about such vastly different places, processes and people as those contained within the ever-changing nineteenth-century British empire at the same time – how to link the local and particular (metropolitan *and* colonial)

⁸ Robinson and Gallagher with Denny, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. xxii.

⁹ P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British imperialism: innovation and expansion 1688–1914* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 5.

¹⁰ P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British imperialism: crisis and deconstruction, 1914–1990* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 297.

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with the general and universal (imperialism). In other words, how to connect people, places and events analytically in the ways that colonial relations had connected them historically.

In his influential survey of the state of imperial history in the aftermath of decolonisation, David Fieldhouse seemed to think that only a super-human scholar could properly attain the necessary vantage point to achieve such an overview. His ideal imperial historian would have to be located

in the interstices of his [*sic*] subject, poised above the 'area of interaction' [between the imperial 'core' and its 'peripheries'] like some satellite placed in space, looking, Janus-like in two or more ways at the same time ... [and giving] equal weight to what happens in a colony and in its metropolis ... intellectually at home in both.¹¹

The tendency of 'traditional' imperial historians, since Fieldhouse's article, to think in terms of 'interactions', 'linkages' or, as John Darwin suggested, 'bridgeheads',¹² between Britain and its colonies, preserved at least some common ground between the discipline of imperial history and in other respects very different postcolonial accounts of empire. Scholars who approached colonial relations from other disciplinary or sub-disciplinary backgrounds, and with a more postcolonial emphasis on culture, were also recognising the need to analyse metropole and colony in the same analytical frame during the 1990s, even if their theoretical orientation led them to resist Fieldhouse's notional ideal of a panoptic (and exclusively gendered) vision.¹³ We do not propose here to enter into the significant theoretical differences between 'traditional' imperial history and post-colonial theory. Nor can we do full justice to the ways that the 'new' imperial history that has emerged since the mid-1990s seeks to blend the attention to empirical detail and historical context of the former, with the post-structuralist understanding of race, class, nationality, sexuality and gender of the latter. But we will attempt at least to draw attention to the different spatial imaginations associated with each tendency.¹⁴

¹¹ D. Fieldhouse, 'Can Humpty-Dumpty be put together again? Imperial history in the 1980s', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 12, 2 (1984), pp. 18–19.

¹² J. Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The dynamics of territorial expansion', *English Historical Review* (June 1997), p. 629.

¹³ A. L. Stoler and F. Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony: rethinking a research agenda', in F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1–58.

¹⁴ On general differences and points of connection between 'traditional' and 'new' imperial history, see D. Kennedy, 'Imperial history and post-colonial theory', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24, 3 (1996), pp. 345–63, and C. Hall (ed.), 'Introduction: Thinking the postcolonial,

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New ways of understanding the British empire as an interconnected space emerged especially out of prominent literary scholars' reflections on their own diasporic identities, as well as the postcolonial criticism of novels and travel writing that had been produced within, and marked by, colonial discourses. Edward Said's work loomed large in both genres.¹⁵ The growing body of criticism of colonial literatures tended by its very nature to traverse national borders as it linked colonial modes of representation from different sites.¹⁶ While imperial historians tended to dismiss much of the work emanating largely from departments of English for being ahistorical, some of their own work was nevertheless gradually coming into dialogue, often in unacknowledged ways, with its spatial openness.

Darwin's article, for instance, touched on themes that were being explored much more explicitly by anthropologists, historians and geographers who found inspiration in postcolonial writing.¹⁷ In recognising the coexistence of different British interests, each with their own ways of connecting metropole and colony (or their own 'bridgeheads'), Darwin approached Nicholas Thomas' insistence that we identify multiple, and often contestatory, 'projects' of colonialism, rather than try to isolate *the* single driving force behind imperial expansion (such as the 'official mind' or 'gentlemanly capitalism').¹⁸ In emphasising the interaction between each British 'bridgehead' and specific local societies, it gestured towards Mary Louise Pratt's notion of 'contact zones'.¹⁹ In noting that different 'bridgeheads' might not be oriented towards compatible aims, it chimed with Ann Laura Stoler and Fred Cooper's call for greater analysis of the significant 'tensions of empire' among colonists, as well as between them and colonised peoples.²⁰ And in conceiving of several 'bridgeheads' connecting any one colony with Britain, Darwin was moving closer to the networked or webbed conception of imperial space characteristic of the

thinking the empire', *Cultures of empire, a reader: colonizers in Britain and the empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 1–36.

¹⁵ E. W. Said, *Orientalism: western conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1978) and *Culture and imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993).

¹⁶ See E. Boehmer, *Colonial and postcolonial literature: migrant metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians'.

¹⁸ N. J. Thomas, *Colonialism's culture: anthropology, travel and government* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

¹⁹ M. L. Pratt, *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 6–7.

²⁰ Stoler and Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony'.

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'new' imperial history, and of recent approaches to the historical geographies of colonialism, as we will see below.²¹

Before we explore the utility of networked notions of empire more thoroughly, it is worth pausing at this point to review what it is about the implicit geographies of 'traditional' imperial history that is most problematic. The empiricist approach of this tradition tends, with some recent exceptions, to translate into a notion of the empire as a space for the movement of material things – of capital and commodities especially. These things are propelled (usually by white, male Britons) between discrete, pre-constituted, bounded places. The internal identity of each of these places is self-evident and unassailable. Sometimes that identity is designated by a specific national or regional entity ('Canada' or 'southern Africa'), but often it is captured by the more reductionist designation of 'core' or 'periphery'. These designations have a specific analytical function. From Seeley,²² through Robinson and Gallagher, and Fieldhouse, to Cain and Hopkins, their function is to explain and locate the (usually singular) motivation for, or cause of, British imperial expansion.

This is a pursuit that seems to be conducted for an audience interested in Britain's 'progress' to 'Great Power' status, rather than one interested in the nature and effects of colonial relations in any one or more places. The main geographical point of difference between authors within the imperial history 'tradition' is whether the 'causes' of Britain's imperial expansion were located in the 'core' itself or in its 'periphery'. What they share is an attempt to retrieve a sense of the imperial whole from the viewpoint of this metropolitan 'core', even if that 'core' is connected to its 'periphery' by 'interactions' or, perhaps, 'bridgeheads'.²³ The places mentioned in this tradition of imperial history, then, are significant as locales only in the Cartesian sense of points on a grid or map, set out in relation to an imperial core which may be Britain as a whole or London

²¹ A spatial imagination premised on the idea of multiple, coexistent connections between Britain and each of its colonies also features in two recent departures in imperial history that should be mentioned. First, there is A. G. Hopkins' drive to make the discipline more politically relevant as a foundation for understanding contemporary globalisation: A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in world history* (London: Pimlico, 2002). Second, there is the series of conferences and resulting publications around the theme of the 'British World': C. Bridge and K. Fedorowich (eds.), *The British world: diaspora, culture and identity* (London: Frank Cass, 2003). Both of these departures are addressed at greater length in Lester, 'Imperial circuits and networks'.

²² J. R. Seeley, *The expansion of England: two courses of lectures*, 2nd edition (London: Macmillan, 1895).

²³ For a similar critique of imperial history's spatial imagery, see F. Driver, 'Distance and disturbance: travel, exploration and knowledge in the nineteenth century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 14 (2004), pp. 80–1.

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in particular. The purpose of this map is to allow the driving forces of Britain's expansion to be plotted. In such an imperial history, neither colonial nor British places are of interest as configurations of peoples, experiences, things and practices in their own right.

NETWORKS IN THE 'NEW' IMPERIAL HISTORY

Scholars who have recently proposed a networked conception of empire generally consider it more useful to try to examine multiple meanings, projects, material practices, performances and experiences of colonial relations rather than locate their putative root causes, whether they are 'economic', 'political' or, indeed, 'cultural'. These relations were always stretched in contingent and non-deterministic ways, across space, and they did not *necessarily* privilege either metropolitan or colonial spaces. They remade both metropolitan and colonial places in the act of connecting them. A colonial history which, as Kirsten McKenzie puts it, 'recasts the relationship between metropolitan centre and colonial periphery into a more contested, unstable and mutually constitutive frame' may have more limited ambition in one sense than a history that seeks definitively to name, locate or model the causes of imperial expansion.²⁴ However, such a history can perhaps fulfil its own aims more effectively.

Importantly, such a history also does a little more to challenge the contemporary acceptance of a European colonial conception of the world. The unquestioning use of categories such as 'centre' and 'periphery' in particular serves not so much to describe, as to reify and perpetuate some of the many spatial distinctions enacted through colonial (and other) unequal relations. At its most damaging, when played out in broader public debates, this reproduction of a language of spatial primacy helps to bolster attitudes and practices of social/racial superiority. Of course, any alternative spatial conceptualisation of colonial relations has to recognise that power relations were never evenly dispersed and that many of the most powerful institutions and individuals were indeed agglomerated in places like Whitehall and the City in London. But we need to see this uneven spatiality as, in large part, a constructed product of colonial relations rather than simply a static and uncontested precondition for them. As Nicholas Dirks puts it, we need to see colonialism less as

²⁴ K. McKenzie, *Scandal in the colonies* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 2004), p. 3.

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‘a process that began in the European metropole and expanded outwards’ and more as ‘a moment when new encounters within the world facilitated the formation of categories of metropole and colony in the first place.’²⁵

In the discussion of Darwin’s work above, we touched upon two aspects of what has been called the ‘new’ imperial history that inform its geographical imagination. The first concerns the notion of multiple colonial projects, and the second, the networks through which these projects were pursued. In partial critique of ‘traditional’ imperial history, ‘new’ imperial history recognises that there was never a single European colonial project, whether it be the pursuit of industrial or ‘gentlemanly’ capitalism, or governmental geo-strategising. Neither, accordingly, was there a single colonial discourse, or set of representations and practices of colonialism. Rather, the agendas of colonial interests, their representations of colonised places and peoples, and their practices in relation to them, were not only differentiated, but also often constructed in opposition to one another. Moreover, these projects and discourses always took shape through connections between colonial and metropolitan places. Catherine Hall, for instance, has written extensively about the contested notions of race, class and gender difference that connected Jamaica and Britain, especially Birmingham, within the reformist evangelical project of the nineteenth century; Ann Laura Stoler has studied relations of sexual intimacy and their role in the construction of social boundaries in different imperial contexts; Antoinette Burton has focused on circuits of discussion over the definition of feminism that connected India and Britain; and Kathleen Wilson has explored the varied performances of difference and domination across the eighteenth-century empire.²⁶

While the focus of much of the ‘new’ imperial history has been on links between a specific colony and its metropole, this is founded on an awareness that these interactions were components of much more extensive networks connecting multiple colonial and metropolitan, as

²⁵ N. B. Dirks, ‘Introduction: colonialism and culture’, in N. B. Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 6. See also A. Burton, ‘Introduction: on the inadequacy and indispensability of the nation’, in A. Burton (ed.), *After the imperial turn: thinking with and through the nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 1–26.

²⁶ C. Hall, *White, male and middle class: explorations in feminism and history* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), and *Civilising subjects: metropole and colony in the English imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); A. L. Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: race and the intimate in colonial rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); A. Burton, *Burdens of history: British feminists, Indian women and imperial culture* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); K. Wilson, *The island race: Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London: Routledge, 2003).

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well as extra-imperial, sites.²⁷ Although the emphasis of each of the studies mentioned above has been on reciprocal cultural and political construction, all recognise that the networks connecting colony to metropole were also of a more material kind. The travel of ideas that allowed for the mutual constitution of colonial and metropolitan culture was intimately bound up with the movement of capital, people and texts between these sites, all dependent in the last resort on the passage of ships, and later, the construction of telegraphic cables across imperial space.²⁸ The 'new' imperial history may place more emphasis than 'older' imperial history on culture, but it does not artificially separate culture from its material conditions.²⁹

Tony Ballantyne has focused recently on circuits of discussion, people and material that connected different colonies, rather than just an individual colony with Britain. He has tracked ideas about Aryanism and racial difference that circulated between India and New Zealand, as well as much further afield. Ballantyne's project has been dependent upon an unusually explicit and extended discussion of the British empire's web-like spatiality. He argues that the image of the web 'captures the integrative nature of . . . cultural traffic, the ways imperial institutions and structures connected disparate points in space into a complex mesh of networks'.³⁰ As Ballantyne notes, the utility of a networked or 'webbed' conceptualisation goes further: it enables us to think about the inherent relationality of nodal points or 'centres' within an empire. Undercutting simple metropole–binary divides, places and people can be 'nodal' in some of their relations with immediate hinterlands or subordinates (Calcutta in relation to Bengal, for instance), and yet simultaneously 'peripheral' in some of their relations with other centres (Calcutta in relation to London).

Of the multiple and continually fragmenting and reconstituting imperial networks of communication that held the empire together, those of colonial governmentality, humanitarian campaigning and settler

²⁷ See A. Lester, *Imperial networks: creating identities in nineteenth century South Africa and Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), and 'British settler discourse and the circuits of empire', *History Workshop Journal* 54 (2002), pp. 27–50.

²⁸ See S. Potter, *News and the British world: the emergence of an imperial press system* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁹ See Lester, *Imperial networks*, pp. 1–9; E. Boehmer, 'Global and textual webs in an age of transnational capitalism; or, what isn't new about empire', *Postcolonial Studies* 7, 1 (2004), pp. 11–26.

³⁰ T. Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race: Aryanism in the British empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 39.