British World Policy and the Projection of Global Power, c.1830–1960

A fundamental truth about British power in the nineteenth century and beyond was that Britain was a global power. Her international position rested on her global economic, naval and political presence, and her foreign policy operated on a global scale. This volume throws into sharp relief the material elements of British power, but also its less tangible components, from Britain’s global network of naval bases to the vast range of intersecting commercial, financial and intelligence relationships, which reinforced the country’s political power. Leading historians reshape the scholarly debate surrounding the nature of British global power at a crucial period of transformation in international politics, and in so doing they deepen our understanding of the global nature of British power, the shifts in the international landscape from the high Victorian period to the 1960s, and the changing nature of the British state in this period.

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In memoriam Keith Neilson
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Preface and Acknowledgements

At the end of the First World War, in the famous quip by Sellar and Yeatman, America had ‘clearly [become] top nation, and History came to a.’ Or so it seemed at the time. History, of course, did not come to an end then or later. What the war of 1914–18 did, however, was, in the words of Keith Neilson, to ‘cast a retroactive shadow over historical studies.’ It skewed scholarly assessments of pre-war British foreign policy by privileging an Anglo-German perspective that was quite alien to the thinking of Britain’s foreign policy elite in the long nineteenth century. And it helped to entrench a ‘declinist’ cast of mind that has tended to see Britain after 1919 as slowly and steadily retreating from global power.

The waxing and waning of British influence in the world, and the nature of the elements of power that underpinned the nation’s international position and the nature of their interaction, has been the subject of enduring fascination for historians, academic and lay alike. It is also at the core of Keith Neilson’s scholarly œuvre. A native of Alberta in western Canada, from his vantage point at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, Ontario, he brought an ‘imperial’ perspective to studies of Britain’s external relations. His work did not neglect the fundamentally European setting of British policy, however. On the contrary, it is remarkable for its finely balanced appreciation of the global nature of British policy. While appreciating the more extraneous, ephemeral even, cultural or ideological aspects of the subject – entirely befitting for someone of his fine literary sensibilities – Keith Neilson nevertheless placed political and material power at the heart of his studies.

These elements lie also at the heart of the essays brought together in this volume. Keith Neilson spent his life, which was tragically cut short within a year of his retirement from RMC, in learning and teaching, in thinking and writing about history and in sustaining his family and friends. Several of his friends and former colleagues have joined in producing this

collection of studies which they offer to Joan, Anne, David and Susan as a token—a slight and, I fear, wholly inadequate one—of their deep and continued respect and affection. These essays serve to underline both the varieties and the essential unity of history; and they justify the vocation of the man in whose memory his friends have written them.

I am grateful to all my fellow contributors for their dedication and efforts. All but two of them stayed the course, and their absence is noted with regret. I am most grateful to Michael Watson at Cambridge University Press for his steady support and sagacious advice during this volume’s elephantine gestation period.