

Introduction

I am the only Professor in England of my art – the art of understanding everything connected with the Constitution, Charters and Laws of some forty Colonies.

James Stephen, Permanent Under-Secretary, Colonial Office, 1845

When James Stephen, chief civil servant at the British government's Colonial Office, returned to his desk after the Christmas break in late December 1837, among the first despatches confronting him contained news of the rebellion of French- and English-speaking settlers in the colonies of Lower and Upper Canada. Through the first four months of the New Year, while he continued to be preoccupied with potential revolution in the Canadas, he also intervened in a debate between the lieutenant governor and governor of the Cape Colony over treaties with the Xhosa people on the eastern frontier, mediated a challenge to the authority of the Justice of the Peace in Port Natal and responded to the first reports of the Dutch-speaking Voortrekkers' mass emigration across the Cape Colony's border – all in southern Africa. At the same time Stephen resisted a massive land grab and extension of sovereignty in New South Wales, approved new measures for surveying the coastline in South Australia and agreed reluctantly to the establishment of a mounted police force to punish Aboriginal people attempting to drive back invading Britons in the Australian colonies. He worried about the seizure of eleven British subjects by a chief neighbouring Sierra Leone and advised caution about Belgium's establishment of a colony adjoining the Gold Coast in West Africa. He forwarded appeals for more troops from Gibraltar in the Mediterranean and from Heligoland in the North Sea, and consulted with the Foreign Office over how best to greet the Egyptian Pasha's envoy, on his way to London to study British artillery innovations. All the while, he was acutely conscious that the date set four years beforehand for the final emancipation of Britain's slaves in the Caribbean colonies, the Cape Colony and Mauritius, was looming. He had yet to advise who exactly was to be freed, and how.

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It would have been quite remarkable if Stephen and his colleagues in imperial governance were able to concentrate on any one of Britain's colonies in isolation, or any one governmental agenda, for any substantial period without interruption. And yet colonial and imperial history is written for the most part as if they did. This book is based upon an appreciation of what it was to govern the most diverse and extensive empire that there has ever been, everywhere and all at once.

Writing the Empire

Until relatively recently, most historians of each of Britain's former colonies wrote across a reasonably broad span of years, but within a field of vision impeded by modern national borders. Historians of Australia were interested in how Australia emerged as its own nation from the separate colonies established by Britons from the late eighteenth century. They implicitly imagined the British Empire operating on an axis solely connecting the Government Houses of Australia with officials like Stephen in London. Stephen and his colleagues in the imperial government were relevant only insofar as they thought of Australian colonies. The multiple ways in which Australia was shaped through its connections with other parts of the empire that Stephen administered, and the gamut of factors that limited the span of Stephen's attention to Australian affairs, did not get a look in.¹ Such blinkers also applied to historians of each of Britain's other colonies.

In recent years, colonial historians' field of vision has broadened considerably, with a spike of interest in transnational and trans-imperial connections. This work, described at the time of its origin as the 'new imperial history', has provided one foundation for this book. Another is the longer standing interest of imperial historians in the administration and governance of the British Empire.

Since the 1990s a body of work driven mainly by women has helped reconfigure imperial history writing, largely by focusing on different questions from those asked by the predominantly male historians of imperial administration. Setting aside the conventional interest in how Britain acquired, governed and then lost an unprecedentedly large and diverse empire, feminist historians like Catherine Hall, Kathleen Wilson, Antoinette Burton and Mrinalini Sinha have been more concerned about the effects of British rule on colonised people, and the ways in which it fostered new patterns of thought about national identity, race, class and gender.² For them, trying to identify the 'driving forces' of empire was a less productive pursuit than exploring its effects on the ways that people relate to one another.³ Colonial relations were forged not only by imperial

administrators but by subjects of different status, gender and identity, pursuing many contradictory projects, connected across the globe by different kinds of networks.⁴ The actors in historical change were of high and low status, men and women, coloniser and colonised, white and of colour. They remade both Britain and its colonies through the connections that they forged.⁵ Such connections are fundamental to this account.

This is not to say, however, that all the elements of this imperial ensemble had equal opportunities to influence the lives of others. It was the task of the men who governed the British Empire to try to manage its chaotic assemblage of people and the infrastructures that connected them. These men exercised an influence out of proportion to their numbers. The policies that they pursued and the violence that they could draw upon to enforce them, conditioned millions of imperial subjects' lives in enduring ways. Men like Stephen, the politicians they served and the governors they appointed, could decide who was to be freed from slavery and who was not; who would participate in elections for colonial governments; who could trade freely and in what items; what rights of legal representation and of education certain people could enjoy; what terms of employment could be offered to whom and, in the final resort, who should be killed and who should live. In the nineteenth century their decisions on these and other matters had unprecedented global reach. While much of the recent scholarship on colonial connections, quite rightly, has shifted the attention away from these elite white men, they are the central figures in this account. This book is concerned above all with the ways that they exercised their responsibility of government in multiple colonies simultaneously.

One might expect that more conventional imperial historians, preoccupied with how Britain acquired, administered and lost its empire, would have had a better appreciation of the range of issues and places with which these men engaged on a daily basis. But for the most part, they seem to have assumed that the empire was governed, if not one place, then one agenda at a time.⁶ In one way this book harks back to an old fashioned approach to imperial history, focused for the most part on its records of administration and its governing men. In other ways it is quite different. It not only looks at those records and their originators afresh, with an eye to the simultaneity of governance everywhere in the Empire at once; it also attends to the effects of these men's decisions for colonised subjects around the world.

The conventional, administratively – oriented, approach to imperial history has been dominated by the notion of an 'official mind', articulated

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by Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher from the 1950s to the 1980s. Their essential argument was that the British government could have had an empire at much lower cost had it stuck to the kind of free trade imperialism that we will deal with in Part I. This enabled Britons to exercise considerable influence over parts of the world such as South America and China without their formal colonisation, in large part through ‘gunboat diplomacy’. The fundamental question for Robinson and Gallagher was, why go to all the expense of imposing and maintaining colonial governments around the world when you could obtain British prosperity and influence without them? Their answer was that ‘circumstances overseas, rather than central policy, had governed the timing and decided the forms of imperial intervention in different regions’.⁷ The ‘official mind’ – the shared sensibility and understanding of the men who governed the British Empire – was crucial in determining when and where a shift from informal to formal empire was needed. Those who developed careers as imperial officials, often in multiple colonies, were the ones who had to decide how best to represent local conditions, to respond to periodic local crises, and to recommend action. Influential men in London like James Stephen shared that sensibility and cooperated with the ‘man on the spot’ to govern an otherwise chaotic empire coherently. The key to understanding the British Empire was to unlock the decision-making process of these men: to get to grips with their official mind set.

This book shares some features of Robinson and Gallagher’s approach. Our cast of characters largely comprises the kinds of figures who populate their account. Like Robinson and Gallagher’s work, much of the action in this book takes place in Britain’s colonies, rather than in London, and it deals with the relations that settlers, governors and occasionally philanthropists maintained with Indigenous populations there. We seek, however, to integrate these imperial men’s actions more fully with the concurrent politics of Britain, and with the effects of their policies on colonised subjects.

A new integrative model of imperial expansion and decline was formulated in the late 1980s by Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins. Whereas Robinson and Gallagher had seen the deliberations of governing ‘men on the spot’ as the primary motor of imperial expansion, Cain and Hopkins located it firmly back in Britain. ‘Gentlemanly capitalism’, emanating above all from Britain’s financial heart in the City of London, was the driving force of interaction between Britain and its colonies. ‘Putting the metropolitan economy back at the centre of the analysis’, they declared, ‘makes it possible to establish a new framework for interpreting Britain’s historic role as a world power’.⁸ British imperialism was the result of

a new marriage (often literally) between those with traditional, landed status and the financial capitalists of the City of London. Cain and Hopkins enlisted parts of both the informal empire (Latin America, Persia and China) and formal empire to make the case that, behind the scenes, the interests of gentlemanly capitalists were at work.⁹ Their argument launched other imperial historians on investigations of the financial and commercial manipulation impelling particular imperial episodes. We see the merit in doing so. For example, we highlight the restructuring of the East India Company and the means by which its shareholders were protected during the 1830s as being fundamental to the subsequent history of British India. But one of the most common grounds for criticism of Cain and Hopkins' thesis, which we share, is its relentlessly British focus. As Tony Ballantyne points out, 'viewing the empire and its history from London . . . returns indigenous people to the margins of history'.¹⁰

David Fieldhouse drew attention to the long-standing problem of 'the imperial historian' noted by Ballantyne: how to write about such vastly different places, processes and people as those contained within the nineteenth-century British Empire at the same time? Fieldhouse's answer was to specialise in the 'interactions' between the British 'core' and its 'peripheries'. The imperial historian, assumed to be male, would be located 'in the interstices of his subject, poised above the "area of interaction" 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

Fieldhouse admitted that 'no one person can satisfy all these requirements', simply because of the amount of historical material that would have to be processed if we were to examine in detail Britain and some forty other countries across any extended period. Our own attempt to encompass this question of being everywhere and all at once is to examine imperial governance everywhere and in much greater detail, but primarily during certain moments or snapshots. We think that this approach also enables us to shed light on the key developments that shaped imperial relations in the intervening periods.

John Darwin's is the latest large-scale attempt to examine the governance of the British Empire. Rather than focusing only inwardly on the deliberations of the British, Darwin relates their empire's fortunes to major geopolitical shifts enacted by other powerful actors across the world. In particular he is preoccupied with how the British global 'system' was subject to an unexpectedly rapid collapse in the mid twentieth century. Understanding this involves an appreciation of rival European powers' actions, of Japanese imperial ambitions and of the USA's role as Britain's ambivalent partner and rival. Our focus is on an earlier period

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than Darwin's – one of imperial growth, crisis and consolidation rather than dismantlement. But Darwin's argument that the motive forces of British imperial history need to be cast wider even than the vast extent of the British Empire itself still holds. British imperial governance was being rebuilt at the beginning of our period after wars with revolutionaries in the USA, France and Haiti. Americans' support for Canadian rebels was reinforcing an antipathy to republican democracy among the governing elite. Throughout, our cast of characters was preoccupied with the difficulties of maintaining contact between Britain and India across Ottoman-ruled Egypt, and both steam and telegraphic communication relied on striking a fine balance between cooperation and competition with other European empires.

Perhaps the most significant external driver of British imperial affairs in this account is Russia, or rather, British perceptions and fears of Russian imperial expansion. Anxiety about Russian encroachment, especially on India's north-western frontier, repeatedly propelled the men who governed the British Empire into more extreme behaviours, the effects of which were felt in other parts of that empire. It was not so much the Colonial Office, nor even the East India Company or India Office, which generated this anxiety, but the Foreign Office. Aside from being a complex governmental entity in its own right, Britain's empire was a weapon to be wielded and defended, almost at any cost, within that department's foreign policy. An interdepartmental view of imperial governance is therefore just as important as an inter-imperial one. As we will see in Part III, for example, Foreign Office preoccupations with Russian influence in the Balkans and Afghanistan in 1878–9 not only cost additional tens of thousands of lives; they also deflected the Colonial Office's priority of settler colonial confederation.

Imperial historians like Robinson and Gallagher and Cain and Hopkins tried to isolate the main driving force behind Britain's empire and Darwin encourages attention to rival empires too. However, there has, as yet, been no account of how the British Empire, in all its complexity and diversity, considering all of its relevant offices and all of its colonies, was governed at any one time. In this book, we see how the men who governed that empire broadly sought security, prosperity and the pursuit of certain ideals in the national interest, but we identify no one motor of imperial expansion nor any key principle behind imperial governance. As one of the Colonial Office's most senior and longest serving officials, Thomas Elliot wrote:

What has to be solved [in imperial governance] is not one problem, but many. I despair of discovering . . . any self-acting rule, which shall be a substitute for the

judgement and firmness of the Ministers of the Crown. . . . They will doubtless always be guided by a policy, but they can hardly expect to despatch such complicated and arduous questions by a single maxim. To deal with cases on their merits, to labour patiently against opposition in some quarters, and to welcome and reciprocate co-operation from others: these, in so wide and diversified a sphere as the British Colonies, appear to me tasks and duties inseparable from the function of governing, which can never be superseded by the machinery of a system, however ably conceived or logically constructed.¹²

If we are to understand imperial governance, we cannot confine ourselves to the pursuit of any particular organisational logic, and we must resist the quest for the ‘main’ driving force. We also have to go beyond the imaginations of the men who governed. Even the arch imperialist Winston Churchill recognised that ‘our claim to be left in the unmolested enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us’.¹³ Our focus in this book may be on the elite white men in charge of the empire, but their view of the world that it shaped cannot be the only one that we narrate.

The British Empire generally seemed a ‘good thing’ to the men who governed it. It does to certain well-known British politicians and popular historians today. In part this is because, as Darwin points out, colonised people often remarked that British rule was preferable to the alternatives at a time of rampant European imperialism. Jeremy Black’s appreciation of the legacies of the British Empire is premised on this notion that it was a less vicious empire than all the others. Black provides a litany of things that people other than Britons did that were worse than the things Britons did: the atrocities of societies and polities occupying the territories that Britain later governed, the brutality of the empires that predominated before Britain’s, and which ruled concurrently elsewhere, and the violence and incompetence of the post-independence governments that took over once the British left. ‘In practice, as a ruler of Caribbean colonies’, Black argues, ‘Britain was less harsh than Spain in Cuba. As a ruler of settlement colonies, Britain, in Canada and New Zealand, was less harsh than the USA; although the situation in Australia was less favorable for the indigenous population than that in Canada. . . . Britain was far less totalitarian than the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany’.¹⁴

Perhaps the best known moral defence of the British Empire from Niall Ferguson makes the same point, arguing that Britain’s legacy as an imperial power, however blemished by slavery, famine and atrocity, is forever redeemed by its sacrifice in order to defeat the Nazis.¹⁵ For Black, Winston Churchill’s call for the distinctiveness of Britain’s empire can be read as its reality. Churchill asked ‘Whether we are to model ourselves upon

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the clanking military empires of the Continent of Europe . . . or whether our development is to proceed by well-trying English methods towards the ancient and lofty ideals of English citizenship?' Of course, the answer was that Britain's Empire should be (and in Black's eyes was) distinguished by the 'regular, settled lines of English democratic development'.¹⁶

Both Black and Ferguson go further than the argument that British imperial rule was comparatively benign. They also assert that it left a generally positive legacy for humanity. Ferguson argues that it 'acted as an agency for imposing free markets, the rule of law, investor protection and relatively incorrupt government on roughly a quarter of the world. . . . There therefore seems a plausible case that empire enhanced global welfare'. The cultural underpinning of these achievements was, apparently, the idea of liberty. 'What is very striking about the history of the Empire is that whenever the British were behaving despotically, there was almost always a liberal critique of that behaviour from within British society. Indeed, so powerful and consistent was this tendency to judge Britain's imperial conduct by the yardstick of liberty that it gave the British Empire something of a self-liquidating character. Once a colonized society had sufficiently adopted the other institutions that the British brought with them, it became very hard for the British to prohibit that political liberty to which they attached so much significance for themselves.'¹⁷ For Black, the British Empire 'arose in the context of modernity and the Enlightenment as broadly conceived'. It 'came with promises of the rule of law, participatory governance, freedom, autonomy and individualism, to at least some of [its] members. Moreover these ideas subsequently spread in [its] area of power, as with the abolition of slavery and the spread of democracy.'¹⁸

These ideals, of a better empire than all the others, and even of an empire that worked for the benefit of all its subjects, were undoubtedly adopted and enunciated by the men who governed the British Empire. This book is structured around three of the terms that these men used most often to articulate them: freedom, civilisation and liberalism. In Part I, our largest section, we focus on the foundational idea of freedom, as applied in emancipation from slavery, the pursuit of free trade and the right of self-governance. In Part II, we see how the men who inherited that idea sought to impose the benefits of Britain's advancing civilisation on often reluctant subjects in the 1850s. In Part III, we highlight the ways in which they adapted the liberalism that they had forged from these principles of freedom and civilisation for the wider world in the later nineteenth century. Departing from Ferguson's and Black's approaches, however, we also highlight the disavowal that lay at the heart of these liberal ideals.

Two systemic features of imperial governance persistently contradicted its expressed ideals in practice: racial distinction and violence. It is because of these fundamental characteristics that the aspirations and protestations of the men who governed the empire cannot realistically be read as its reality. The principles of freedom, civilisation and liberalism that motivated them were dissolved in a solution of violent racism through which British power was applied. Even the most benevolently inclined governing men found it impossible to extract pure and universal solutes from that application. In our three periods of detailed analysis alone, the extent of the violence inflicted upon people of colour by the agents of British imperial governance is astonishing. We can state with some confidence that British forces killed in total over a million people in the First Afghan War and the First Opium War (1838–42), the suppression of the Indian Uprising and the Second Opium War (1856–8), and the Second Afghan War and wars for South African confederation (1878–80).¹⁹ A Colonial Office clerk might well say that ‘There are points on which mere military expediency must clash with consideration of policy & humanity & in such cases the military expediency must be very strong or it should give way’, but killing on a scale greater than any contemporaneous empire was essential to establish the sway of British ‘policy & humanity’ around the world in the first place.²⁰

Even in territories long administered by Britain, as Churchill recognised, the ongoing threat of violence, against people of colour in particular, remained an essential backstop for governance without consent. In 1859, the same Thomas Elliot who pointed to the lack of any overarching governing logic conducted a review of how much military force was required to retain each of Britain’s colonies. Their varying racial composition was critical to his calculation. ‘They are exposed . . . some more and others less’, he wrote, ‘to perils from Natives . . . in certain Colonies, [the] population is British, in others foreign; in part of them it is wholly white, in part almost wholly coloured, and in many it consists of a large proportion of both. . . . Is it surprising with Colonies of such an infinite variety of condition, that . . . their demands for military assistance should be different?’²¹ Elliot’s premise derived from the correspondence of governors like Henry Ward in Ceylon, who explained that ‘an Oriental People is swayed by impulse, and checked only by its habitual submission to power. So long as we have that, small disputes, which are of frequent occurrence between Planters and Natives . . . are easily settled. . . . But when we have not the power, there is always a risk of . . . serious collisions.’²²

For officials like the evangelical James Stephen in London, the governance of empire could be mainly a theoretical question. Imperial

governance was something that could and should have right, as well as might, on its side. It should improve the prospects, both material and spiritual, of Britain's subjects around the world, regardless of race. The problem was that empire necessarily entailed the denial of other people's self-determination, the use of violence to sustain that denial and, in the settler colonies, the mass eviction and subjection of prior inhabitants on behalf of British emigrants. Imperial officials in London might complain that settlers, and even occasionally governors, contradicted their liberal ideas and undermined their benevolent intentions in the colonies. They might, accordingly, condemn their distant compatriots as acting in a manner unbecoming Britons. Later generations of Britons might blame the destruction of Indigenous societies on people who came to be identified as Australians or Canadians, rather than Britons overseas. Every time they did so, they disavowed the nature of the British Empire. It was premised, as empires always have been, on taking possession and control of other peoples' lands, and on the reduction of alien peoples, by one means or another, to a subordinate position for the national benefit.

Everyday administration of the British Empire, as will see in abundance in this book, was completely saturated with racial differentiation. To give one, rather quirky, example, the idea of differing racial capacity extended even to the care of lighthouses. 'While I should have no scruple whatever in entrusting to natives properly trained the care of the lighthouses at Colombo, Galle, and Trincomalie', the governor of Ceylon wrote in 1879, 'I think that the entrusting to natives the care of such important and at the same time such isolated lighthouses as the Great and Little Basses, requires grave consideration. I find upon inquiry in India and Singapore that in the Madras Presidency natives (Asiatics) have not been placed in sole or partial charge of any lighthouses. And the light houses throughout the Straits have a European or Eurasian in charge. In Hong Kong a Light of the Fourth order is said to be in charge of Chinese only, under frequent supervision. But Chinese are so far superior to the bulk of other Orientals in steadiness and intelligence that the successful employment of Chinese in any pursuit is by no means a guarantee that the employment of other Orientals in the same pursuit would be equally successful.'²³ Throughout the empire, one of the most consistent features of British governance was its assumption that people of colour were 'not yet qualified by education and property to command the respect of the country'.²⁴ It may be comforting for Britons today to hear that 'it became very hard for the British to prohibit' their imperial subjects 'that political liberty to which they attached so much significance for themselves'.²⁵ Unfortunately it is not true. The Victorian British were, for the most part, quite comfortable with the denial of that same liberty to