The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fich20

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To cite this article: Saul Dubow (2009): How British was the British World? The Case of South Africa, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 37:1, 1-27
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03086530902757688

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How British was the British World? 
The Case of South Africa
Saul Dubow

This paper discusses the utility of the term ‘Britishness’ in the context of the ‘British World’ conference series. It suggests reasons why the ‘British world’ idea as presently understood was relatively slow to emerge out of traditional nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperial and commonwealth history. Ranging over more than a century from the 1870s to the present, it surveys uses of the term ‘British’ in imperial historiography and draws most of its empirical evidence from the unusual case of South Africa. The paper eschews ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ definitions of Britishness and proposes instead a more capacious formulation capable of including elective, hyphenated forms of belonging. It suggests that there are advantages in thinking of the British Empire less in the possessive sense – the empire that belonged to Britain – and more in the adjectival mode as a mode of description capable of taking into account self-declared affinities and values.

The ‘British world’ has emerged as a vibrant field of research over the past decade and now constitutes an important dimension of the ‘new’ British imperial history. ¹ A generation ago, only a Micawber would have foreseen such an outcome for in the 1980s the field of imperial and commonwealth history was visibly atrophying. Largely ignored by historians of Britain (a field that was itself beset by a crisis of confidence and direction) ² and no longer seen as central to the work of regional scholars based in the old colonial world, a discipline that had grown up along with the empire/commonwealth appeared to be following it into senescence. This impression seemed only to be confirmed by the fact that some of the most innovative work that was being done by imperial historians at this time concerned the problem of decolonisation, a focus that seemed in tune with broader attitudes of trimming and cloth cutting, of coping with loss and managing decline. New theoretical approaches which might have enlivened debate, particularly those associated with the work of Said and Foucault, were shunned or ignored.³ David Fieldhouse’s mordant 1984 essay on the future of imperial and commonwealth history was thus a representative statement of a fragmenting, postcolonial world.⁴

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ISSN 0308-6534 print/1743-9329 online/09/010001–27
DOI: 10.1080/03086530902757688 © 2009 Taylor & Francis
Since then British imperial history, in common (and sometimes in association) with other branches of historical investigation, has benefited from a broadening of historical horizons. The rise of American hyper-power in the decade after the fall of the Berlin wall has spurred interest in historical analogues and precedents. Growing awareness of the possibilities of global and transnational histories, of trans-oceanic systems and worlds (Atlantic and Indian), and of the histories of migration and diaspora, have expanded frames of reference. Social and cultural history has aerated compacted ground. Cross-disciplinary influences, from literature, cultural studies and post-colonial theory, as well as geography and anthropology, have steadily been absorbed.

Although it is possible to identify underlying trends which have helped to refashion the British world, its revival has been largely undirected and unheralded. This invites us to reflect on the foundations of the new imperial historiography. One dimension requiring more careful consideration is the continuity and discontinuity between old and new imperial histories. This is not so much relevant to the strand of the new imperial historiography which bears the strong influence of postcolonial theory, for in this case connections with traditional imperial and commonwealth historiography were tenuous in the first place. The question of intellectual ancestry and descent is, however, worth posing for ‘new’ imperial historians of the ‘British world’ who have been shaped by interests in the political, economic and cultural dimensions of post-1780s British territorial expansion and contraction. Area studies specialists concerned with the impact of empire in the settler dominions are closely associated with this strand of the new imperial historiography; so, too are students of Britain and Britishness who are attuned to the influence of empire on metropolitan politics and culture. The vibrancy of the new imperial history means that these constituencies increasingly overlap, yet differences of emphasis and in intellectual lineage are not difficult to discern.

Historians of the ‘British world’ generously conceive of the field as being capable of drawing in divergent approaches, yet such open-mindedness should not work to occlude real differences in emphasis. The field is certainly not as well established, theoretically developed or intellectually assertive as its cognate partner, Atlantic studies. Some critics of the modern ‘British world’ may suspect that it is merely a dressed up form of the old imperial history or, worse, that it recalls the racially inflected nineteenth-century vision of ‘Greater Britain’ propounded by the likes of Seeley and its coeval Atlanticist equivalent, the Anglo-Saxonist race history of E. A. Freeman.

This paper suggests that our understanding of the British world requires further explication in order to encourage its further development. It uses South Africa as a case study to explore the utility of a concept of Britishness that dispenses, as far as is possible, with connotations of racial or ethnic ancestry and which decouples the idea of Britishness from the British state or the ‘ethnological’ unity of Greater Britain hankered after by J. R. Seeley. It does so by challenging the unstated assumption that the British Empire refers to territories and peoples which were somehow owned or collectively possessed by the United Kingdom and proposes instead a more capacious category capable of including elective, hyphenated forms of belonging. It downplays...
the jurisdictional power of the British crown and British parliament in favour of institutions and symbols that are shared or de-territorialised. Britishness, in this sense, is better seen as a field of cultural, political and symbolic attachments which includes the rights, claims and aspirations of subject-citizens as well as citizen-subjects——‘non-Britons’ as well as ‘neo-Britons’ in today’s parlance. Space is thereby created for the inclusion of colonial nationalists of various political stripes and colours who, paradoxically, may have chosen to affirm their Britishness even in the act of resisting British imperialism.

These claims, while not altogether novel, require elaboration because they remain implicit rather than fully stated in the British world approach. The reason why they are not fully articulated may reflect the peculiar emergence of the sub-discipline and its complex relationship to traditional imperial and commonwealth historiography. Thus, rather than merely pointing to the revival of British imperial history, we ought to ask why studies of identity formation, conducted in a manner that has long been familiar to proponents of the early modern Atlantic World and to historians of social identity more generally, were relatively slow to emerge in the British world. A partial answer is the hold exercised on the field of modern British imperial history by its twin post-war titans, Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher.

It is widely accepted that Robinson's and Gallagher’s interventions fundamentally redefined post-war imperial history and reoriented it away from its older semi-official domain: politics, government, administration and constitutional law. But Robinson and Gallagher also exerted a restraining influence that deterred enquiry into key research areas which animate the ‘new’ imperial history, namely, those dealing with culture and ideology, identity and the relationships between colonial knowledge and power. In the first place Robinson and Gallagher’s concentration on the circumstantial role of interest groups and pragmatic men of empire (whether policy-makers at home or those residing ‘on the spot’) coexisted with a disdain towards high-flown theorists of empire. Imperial-minded intellectuals such as Seeley, Freeman, Dilke, Curtis and Egerton figure hardly at all in their key works. Also given short shrift are radical and Marxist critics like Hobson and Lenin who saw expansionist nineteenth-century imperialism as a function of capitalist development.11 Ideology, in short, finds little place in the Robinson and Gallagher perspective; their focus is always on hard facts, strategic calculation and harsh realities.

Secondly, Robinson and Gallagher’s privileging of India at the heart of the second and third British empires works to peripheralise the importance of settler colonies and the role of neo-Britons in Africa, Australasia and North America. These are all areas with which the new British imperial history is closely concerned (and which older approaches took for granted).14 The marginalisation of Africa is consistent with Robinson and Gallagher’s view that informal empire was the preferred way in which influence was exercised, and that the era of popular late-nineteenth-century imperialism and colonial acquisition was an aberration.15 Combined with their lack of sustained interest in questions of ideology, the effect has been to damp down any serious attention to the hopes and claims of British migrants and settlers, as well as consideration of the complexities of the imperial encounter, its imagery and its rituals.
Thirdly, there is Robinson and Gallagher’s mechanical theory of indigenous collaboration. This debunking concept, developed in part as a response to the rise of anti-imperialist nationalist historiography in India and Africa, fitted in well with the unsentimental and non-ideological approach they favoured, as well as helping to bolster their neat thesis of empire acquired and maintained on the cheap. Yet collaborators emerge merely as functional elements in a system of reciprocal exchange; the subtle range of motivations and aspirations of collaborators, let alone their self-created subjecthood (which could and often did include affiliation to the empire) do not and need not figure in the model of collaboration set out by Robinson and, to a lesser extent, Gallagher. Themes like imperial loyalism and patriotism, as well as race and nationality – all important issues in the new imperial history – are not treated seriously. The static mechanical and spatial metaphors which they offer to express the relationship between imperial core and periphery, taken together with the uni-directional outward diffusion of forces, ideas, and people from the metropole, contrasts markedly with the resonating language of the postcolonial metaphorical repertoire: hybridity, fluidity, ambiguity and decentredness.

It does no disservice to the enduring importance of Robinson and Gallagher’s work to suggest that their pervasive, even paradigmatic, influence on modern imperial history has acted to foreclose on many of the key questions about identity, ideology and nationality posed by the new imperial history (questions with which they would probably be out of sympathy). Notably, Robinson and Gallagher are cited frequently and dutifully in a recent collection assembled by Sarah Stockwell which serves to bring together many of the recent innovations in the subject of imperial history. Yet only Stephen Howe’s contribution signals clearly that the Robinson-Gallagher influence is directly contrary to current directions, namely on the relationship between empire and ideology. In order to reconnect the literature of the modern British world and the new imperial history with its historiographic forebears, earlier writers, foremost among them Keith Hancock, merit closer attention.

I

South Africa may appear an unlikely place to begin a study of the British world. By comparison with the other white dominions it was the least thoroughly anglicised and undoubtedly the most troublesome. Despite, or because of, this reputation, South Africa became uniquely fixed in the British imagination for over a century: it was the country in which the British experienced dramatic military defeats at the hands of Zulus and Afrikaners, where Britain’s legacy as a rapacious economic presence and active imperialist power was keenly felt and where the experience of reconciling Boer and Briton, culminating in Union in 1910, exemplified the possibilities of the transmutation of empire into commonwealth.

If South Africa was a test case of empire, to use Donal Lowry’s formulation, it was also a limit case. Leading nineteenth-century authorities on empire, most notably J. R. Seeley and Charles Dilke, were sceptical of South Africa’s potential as a British colony of settlement. Seeley placed South Africa in his fourth group of countries...
which could claim to be ‘English throughout’: below Australia, Canada and even the West Indies. The problem of nationality was doubly difficult because it did not satisfy the requirement of ‘ethnological unity’ – in today’s parlance, racial or ethnic homogeneity. For Dilke, similarly, the ‘double difficulty presented by a foreign white population outnumbering the English and a so-called “native” population…vastly outnumbering both together’ was very unlike Australia, so often cited as the model of Greater Britain.

Jump forward 100 years and one finds Robinson and Gallagher asserting that ‘in trying to make South Africa into another Canada they only created another Ireland. From this standpoint it was a case of mistaken identity…. In the end they went to war for the obsolete notion of imperial supremacy in a Dominion – for a cause which was already a grand illusion.’ J. G. A. Pocock equivocates by deploying parenthesis when he calls for ‘colonies established in the same nineteenth-century complex of oceans as Australia, New Zealand, and (an apparent case of failure) South Africa’ to ‘construct and write their own histories and their own British history’.

It was in the mid-1870s that South Africa came to attention as a region for expanded British settlement and influence. As a result, the country’s defining racial problems came to be conceptualised anew. This was the era of the subcontinent’s mineral revolution, of the final conquest of African chiefdoms and polities, and the failed attempt to impose a form of confederation on the subcontinent’s chaotic mixture of British colonies, Boer republics and African societies.

Two noted imperial men of letters, Anthony Trollope and J. A. Froude, did much to frame South Africa in the public imagination at this time. Their roles have been much underestimated. Froude, the great historian of Britain and student of Carlyle, visited South Africa on two occasions in the 1870s in order to ease the way for colonial secretary Carnarvon’s strategy of imperial confederation. He shared many of the attitudes and assumptions of contemporary advocates of the new imperialism: specifically, a view of British destiny and expansion expressed in the insistent language of race and nation. He was especially attracted to the ideal of a pre-eminent ‘Anglo-Saxon’ race capable of reinvigorating its ‘mighty youth’ in the fresh air and open spaces of the empire. In Froude’s most extended treatment of this subject, Oceana, he envisioned a modern version of James Harrington’s seventeenth-century utopian dream of ‘a perfect commonwealth, half real, half ideal’ composed of ‘the Scotch, English and Anglo-Irish nations’. Bound together by common economic interests, ‘animated by a common spirit’, united and shielded by its naval power, Froude looked towards the day when Britain, together with Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, ‘would ride securely in self-supporting nations in the four quarters of the globe’.

Froude was, however, congenitally contrary and soon after arriving at Table Bay he went off message. He rapidly came to the view that imperial intervention, particularly in respect of the Boer republics, had been a disaster. He was convinced that the diamond fields rightly belonged to the Orange Free State, he spoke in favour of a ‘South African native policy on “Transvaal lines”’, and he maintained that confederation could never come about until the understandable feelings of resentment on the
part of the Dutch were assuaged. Froude had, in effect become philo-Boer and, in
doing so, he implicitly departed from Seeley’s insistence that the notion of ‘Greater
Britain’ necessarily implied the ‘enlargement of the English State, and not simply of
the English nationality’.24

Froude’s distaste for modernity rendered him wholly unsympathetic towards the
‘adventurers’ who came to take advantage of the country’s mineral wealth. In a
speech at Bloemfontein he reminded his audience that the sailors who defeated the
Armada had not been ‘fortune-seekers’. The ‘soldiers of liberty who risked their lives
in defence of the country were the hardy yeomanry and peasantry and fishermen who
were fighting for home and firesides.’ In South Africa their equivalents were plainly
the Boer farmers who ‘the only true colonists. They alone make South Africa their
home. They alone are cultivating the soil.25 These hardy Calvinists, who so reminded
Froude of canvasses painted by Van Eyck and Teniers, had the virtue of being untainted
by liberty in its modern sense. Such a man possessed a ‘stubborn practicality well
suited for the work which he has chosen as the pioneer of African civilization.26

Froude did not help the cause of imperial federation by antagonising the new colo-
nial elite who were fiercely proud of the Cape’s recently won constitutional rights,
men like the prime minister, John Molteno, and influential liberal parliamentarians
like Saul Solomon and John X. Merriman. In 1875 Merriman publicly castigated
Froude’s conduct as ‘[i]mperial agitation promoted by a political emissary from
Home’. No less provocative was Merriman’s assertion that he himself was ‘a Colonist
first, then an Englishman’, a clear indication of his colonial nationalist proclivities.27
Froude could only express disdain towards the ‘Cape politicians [who] strut about
with their Constitution as a schoolboy newly promoted to a tail coat, and...imagine
that they have the privileges of perfect independence, while we are to defend their
coasts and keep troops to protect them in case of Kaffir insurrection.’28

In his writings Froude often used the word ‘constitutional’ in a pejorative sense,
believing that government exercised through a balanced representation of interests
was no guarantee of moral order or responsibility. The irony, as John Burrow has
pointed out, was that ‘the attachment of the new English settlements across the Atlan-
tic to ancient constitutionalism was to be perhaps more deeply-seated and lasting than
that of England itself.’29 This is not so surprising when one considers that respect for
parliamentary sovereignty was closely bound up with colonial pride and respect. There
was in South Africa no conservative, established British gentry to pour scorn on the
jumped-up middle classes. Indeed, in the microcosm of Cape colonial politics,
Froude, the Carlylean Tory, had run up against an articulate strand of local Whiggism
whose patriotism was expressed in terms of the indivisible rights of freeborn English-
men, whether exercised at home or in the colonial arena. One such man was Saul
Solomon, the leading liberal politician of the day, who, in opposing Carnarvon’s
plans for confederation, proclaimed himself, in an 1875 speech to parliament, ‘a
Cape colonist and an Englishman’. He elicited cheers when he said: ‘I shall therefore
be a small man as Cape Colonist, even if a bigger one as a citizen of the Dominion.’30

This point hints at a larger one, namely, that in defining the British world (parti-
cularly in the case of the dominions) we ought to distinguish between the overt
projection of British power from abroad (imperialism) and the assertion of British influence by local actors whose affinities with their new countries of settlement overlapped with their sense of ‘home’ (colonialism). Today these terms are often used interchangeably, yet in the historical context of settler nationalism they were apt to mean different things. Briefly stated, the nativism that found expression as colonial nationalism presupposed an expansive sense of identity which understood, implicitly or explicitly, that Britishness was a composite, rather than an exclusive, form of identity. It was frequently idealised in terms of the attachment to constitutional forms of government and the display of a higher loyalty to the rights of free-born Englishmen. A. P. Thornton, writing of the dominions in the 1870s, explains it well in the case of Australasians who:

living in a vast land surrounded by vaster seas did not want to cut themselves off spiritually from all other human companionship. To them, England was, and was to remain, an idea rather than a place: the idea of ‘home’. Self-government having removed the Downing Street irritant, the natural loyalism of kinship found nothing to grate its teeth on, and so could sentimentalise about the imperial bond without feeling irked by it.31

The immensely prolific Anthony Trollope, who visited the Cape in 1877, produced his two-volume *South Africa* in a matter of months at great speed. More than a century on his *South Africa* retains a sense of energy and freshness. Trollope’s procession through the country attracted close attention and he gained access to all the key figures of the day. In doing so he established an ongoing discussion with his colonial interlocutors. It was out of the conversation which developed between such noted outside observers as Trollope and Froude, and an increasingly self-aware network of locally based commentators based at the Cape, that the modern process of imagining South Africa as an integral polity began.

As with Froude, Trollope’s experiences persuaded him to revise his preconceptions of the Boer as ‘a European who had retrograded from civilization, and had become savage, barbarous and unkindly’. ‘The Dutch Boer’, he insisted, ‘is what he is, not because he is Dutch or because he is a Boer, but because circumstances have isolated him.’32 By contrast, Trollope’s view of Africans veered between casual contempt for their alleged racial inferiority and a vague hope that they might in time prove amenable to civilising processes under white tutelage. He was alert to the central importance of the ‘native question’, recognising that it was this that marked South Africa out from the other white colonial dominions. Hence his much-quoted aphorism:

*South Africa is a country of black men, – and not of white men. It has been so; it is so; and it will continue to be so. In this respect it is altogether unlike Australia, unlike the Canadas, and unlike New Zealand. And, as it is unlike them, so should it be to us a matter of much purer gratification than are those successful Colonies.*33

The point of this observation was not to deny that ‘the white man has to be master and the black man servant’; on the contrary, Trollope endorsed the idea of white ascendency (while expressing satisfaction – gratification – that indigenous peoples were
being civilised in South Africa unlike in other dominions where they had merely perished). Rather, Trollope was, like Froude, underlining South Africa’s exceptional colonial status and warning that, unlike other British colonies of settlement, the indigenous races of South Africa enjoyed overwhelming numerical superiority and were not likely to die out in the face of colonisation.

For many nineteenth-century writers the demographic (and eugenic) reality of South Africa’s ‘vigorous natives’ was one of the country’s most distinctive and troubling features. The preponderance of blacks over whites meant that South Africa might never become part of the empire in the same way as the other dominions. This pessimistic view of the country’s suitability as an imperial realm of settlement bears comparison with that of Froude, who was also concerned that South Africa was riddled by internal divisions and destined to become a second Ireland. By comparison with Australia, South Africa was ‘blighted’. ‘One is a free colony, the other is a conquered country. One is a natural and healthy branch from the parent oak’, the other ‘a gangrene in the body politic of Oceana.’ The anxiety that South Africa was insufficiently British was a concern for many imperialists, none more so than Milner, who famously referred to it as ‘just now the weakest link in the Imperial chain’.

II

For Milner it was ‘the Dutch’ or the Boers who threatened South Africans’ Britishness. He could appreciate that a considerable number of ‘men of Dutch race’ were identified with the ‘progressive’, that is to say British party, while ‘a few, a very few, British side with the Afrikanders.’ But Milner’s view of the conflict was resolutely binary: one was either British or Dutch, loyal or disloyal, and race was the key predisposing factor. Milner wilfully overlooked or denied those colonialists, English as well as Dutch-speaking, who combined loyalty to the crown with patriotism towards South Africa. He therefore misunderstood the difference between colonialism and imperialism – a distinction that was very much to the fore in mid- to late-nineteenth-century thinking, and which has again been lost or confused in the heightened imperial moment of the late-twentieth century.

One of those who did understand the distinction was Milner’s predecessor as High Commissioner of South Africa, Hercules Robinson, whose sympathies with Irish home rule and Australian experience had helped to sensitise him to local opinion. In a major speech in 1889 Robinson provoked controversy by announcing that imperialism was ‘a diminishing quantity, there being now no permanent place in South Africa for Imperial control on a large scale’. Robinson maintained that imperialism had to contend with the forces of [Boer] republicanism on the one hand, and colonialism on the other. Charles Dilke, writing in 1890, was one of those prepared to defend Robinson for his conciliation of the Dutch, agreeing with him that ‘interference from home strengthens republican and separatist feeling among colonists, English as well as Dutch, and that a prudent continuation of his own policy would cause the past jealousy between the English and the Dutch in South Africa to die away and South Africa under British rule to prosper’. ‘Race feeling’, he ventured, was
'quietening down, and if the colony were left to itself, without pressure from home, would soon disappear.'

Hercules Robinson was correct in arguing that there was ‘no permanent place’ for imperial control or, in Robinson and Gallagher’s formulation, that ‘the empire must defer to colonial opinion, if it was to make sure of colonial loyalty,’ but he proved spectacularly wrong in his claim that imperialism was a diminishing quantity: just six years after he made this assessment the Jameson Raid took place. But the outrage that greeted the raid, which was, in the scale of things, a puny and amateurish attack on Kruger’s republic, says more about the exceptional nature of late-nineteenth-century Milnerite imperialism than it does to confirm jingoistic aggression as the default expression of imperialism. For the liberal Cape political elite, it was genuinely shocking that Cecil John Rhodes, who had come to power as a Cape colonial nationalist and who seemed so sympathetic to Cape Dutch needs and sensibilities, should emerge as British imperialism’s most rapacious backer. They would surely have concurred with Prime Minister Salisbury’s tentative assessment of Rhodes in 1889 as ‘rather a pro-Boer M.P. in South Africa, I fancy?’ Dilke, writing in 1890, favoured conciliation towards the Dutch (as he did towards the Irish) and looked forward to a time when the term ‘Afrikander’ would ‘embrace all the inhabitants of white race’.

The spirit of colonial nationalism in South Africa stretched back to the early nineteenth century. It was not necessarily opposed to Englishness, or Britishness, but it was incompatible with the spirit of British imperialism or jingoism that emerged later in the century. It developed in tandem with, but often in opposition to, official efforts to project British supremacy. When Charles Darwin stopped off briefly at Simonstown in 1836 on his return voyage from the Galapagos he remarked, without too much enthusiasm, that the Cape was one of many colonies around the world where ‘little embryo Englands are hatching’. This was a superficial assessment. The organism had to mutate and subsequent generations of chicks would differ in subtle ways from their parents. Anglicisation was not merely a process of assimilation or replication; in evolutionary terms this cultural form had to adapt to survive.

Anglicisation in the sense envisaged by Lord Charles Somerset in the early nineteenth century, or Alfred Milner at the turn of the twentieth century, faced major obstacles: resistance on the part of Dutch colonists and Boer republicans respectively. But this did not preclude subtler forms of anglophone influence and attachment within the country’s elites. The sense of British colonial consciousness that evolved in the environs of nineteenth-century Cape Town emerged through combined Dutch and British resistance to Lord Charles Somerset’s gubernatorial authority in the 1820s (analogous in some respects to the development of Anglo-Dutch ‘South Africanism’ which coalesced in opposition to Milner’s efforts to impose British supremacy during and after the South African War). Constitutionalism was key. Events in the early development of colonial nationalism included the remarkable 1848 anti-convict campaign by Dutch and English-speakers against the will of the colonial government and the ensuing negotiation of representative and then responsible government. Crucially, the struggle to secure the rights of freeborn Englishmen could only be won by including others – black as well as white – as citizens of the
Cape; this process entailed the assertion of a view of English constitutional freedom which the imperial granting authority did not readily accede to.

A few representative nineteenth-century samples will have to suffice to indicate how English-speakers (of Scottish, Dutch, Jewish and German ancestry respectively) began to think of themselves as British (or English) as well as South African:

- The journalists and political activists Thomas Pringle and John Fairbairn in the *South African Commercial Advertiser* of 1824:

> Whatever we are, whether born in the Northern or Southern hemisphere, in England, in Holland, or in Africa, if we have made Africa our home, and feel a common interest in the prosperity of the Colony, we are all Africans.

> If we do as we ought – we will love, respect, and promote the welfare, first of our families, friends, and connections – secondly, that of the Colony we inhabit – next of the Empire of which it forms a part – and lastly of the whole human race.46

- Thomas François Burgers, newly elected president of the Transvaal, at the diamond fields in 1872, looking forward to a future South Africa, free and prosperous: ‘a great country, when all nationalities shall disappear, and the words English and Dutch become obsolete, and like Americans or Canadians, we shall be more proud to call ourselves Afrikanders than either English or Dutch.’47

- Saul Solomon at parliamentary nomination day in 1874, professing himself an ‘Afrikander’, only to explain: ‘At the same time let me say that I have no wish to disavow my being an Englishman, and I wish ever to remain under the jurisdiction of the British Crown. So that I do not speak of being an Afrikander in disparagement of being an Englishman. I rather glory in being an Englishman.’48

- And W. P. Schreiner, who in 1898 stood for election at the Cape on the platform of ‘true Imperialism and true Colonialism’. A year earlier, he had informed the House of Commons enquiry into the Jameson Raid: ‘I am South African first, but I think I am English after that.’49

This hyphenated sense of English or British and Cape colonial identity was firmly understood by the anglophone elite which made up the Cape’s political class from the mid-nineteenth century. One says ‘British’ or ‘English’ because it is so difficult to decouple the two. Englishmen might represent themselves as British; Scots, Welsh and Irish were often glossed (and were also apt to refer to themselves) as ‘English’ according to circumstance; Afrikaner historians would refer to the South African war more or less interchangeably as the ‘Engelse’ or the ‘Britse oorlog’. Yet, if the politics of identity encouraged slippery usage, Britishness was used more consistently when referring to the core institutions of imperial state power, that is to say, when referring to the army, the navy and the parliament at Westminster.

Some of those who counted as British – or even English – were in fact Irish or Scots. Unlike Australia, South Africa never became a destination for mass Irish immigration. Most Irish in the first decades of the nineteenth century assimilated into colonial English society; others became acculturated as Dutch or coloured. In the 1890s Irish were to be found on both sides of the political divide, some supporting Boer
republicanism and others expressing loyalty to Britain. It is probable that Irish Catholics found it easier to accommodate themselves to Britishness abroad than at home.

Scots were heavily represented in professional life and public life: in particular in the fields of medicine, commerce, education and mission work, as well as in law and in the natural sciences. From Thomas Pringle through to John Buchan, the Scots manifested a natural affinity with South Africa’s landscape: as ‘North Britons’, as ‘borderers’ and as scions of Edinburgh’s ‘moment of the mind’, they were particularly well suited to understanding life on the provincial margins of empire. Striking, however, is the fact that they evidently felt little need to identify themselves publicly as Scots. To be sure, they had their places of congregation, the Scots Church in Cape Town, for example, or their Caledonian societies or their Cape Town Highlanders’ regiment. But, in the main, their life as Scots seemed to be lived out through informal connections and affiliations. We know from their writings, autobiographies and obituaries, that Scotsmen were intensely aware of their Scottish compatriots, where they had come from, who had educated them, which families they came from. Yet, this was mainly a matter of the private sphere. Historians, who recover subjects’ lives only from written sources, tend to overlook an obvious ethnic marker; many would have spoken with distinct Scottish accents.

In the early nineteenth century, Scottish churchmen such as Andrew Murray and George Thom left the London Missionary Society to join the Dutch Reformed Church. The ease with which many prominent Scots were absorbed within Cape Dutch families and institutions is a reminder that cultural assimilation is a two-way process and that British values could spread even when their agents adopted different ethnic labels. It is well known that the ‘Dutch’ in South Africa were composed of Hollanders, Huguenots and Germans; they were also infused with a significant proportion of ‘Afrikaner’, which is to say ‘coloured’ or ex-slave ‘blood’, to use the idiom of the time. It should also be remembered that many leading elements in the Dutch community, members of the Afrikaner Bond and even those who gravitated to the incipient Afrikaner nationalist movement were anglicised to a considerable degree. J. H. ‘Onze Jan’ Hofmeyr, who led the Afrikaner Bond, edited De Zuid-Afrikaan and cooperated closely with Cecil Rhodes until 1895, was one of the anglophilic Dutch-speaking elite whom Hermann Giliomee refers to as the ‘Queen’s Afrikaners’ or the ‘Anglo-Men’. One of these, J. H. De Villiers, then chief justice of the Cape Colony, expressed scepticism in 1876 about the literary pretensions of the Afrikaans language movement, assuming that the language of Great Britain would eventually become the language of South Africa. In his view there was no reason why this should work against ‘the patriotism of South Africans’.

It was as a direct consequence of the Boer War that the Afrikaans language movement became such a central dimension of Afrikaner nationalism, but few Afrikaners at this time believed that it could or should supplant English. Language equality was the aspiration; primacy for Afrikaans was too much to hope for. Although many Boers hoped to turn the clock back and reinvigorate the republican dream, this was more usually directed to the restoration of the status quo ante than projected
forwards to the mid-twentieth-century vision of South Africa as a volk state existing entirely independently of the British Commonwealth.

The emerging African middle class was equally, perhaps even more, locked into the British world. This segment of colonial society was deeply imbued with Victorian values as a consequence of the influence of missionary education, investment in ideals of progress and improvement, and the pursuit of individual and familial respectability. As Bickford-Smith puts it, in South Africa as in West Africa or in India, ‘the most important agents of British hegemony came from the ranks of the “rising class” themselves.’ Some African nationalists, rather like uncompromising Boer republicans, envisioned freedom as a retreat from imperial (or in their case white) interference and jurisdiction, but these were exceptions.

No history of the African National Congress can escape the dominating influence of a Christianised educated elite in its formative years or the conspicuous evidence of British forms of address and dress in its verbal pronouncements and visual self-representation. Strikingly, the literature on the history of African nationalism treats this with cautious ambivalence because of the assumption that resistance necessitated overt and consistent rejection of imperial hegemony. While some accounts exhibit a degree of quaint nostalgia for South Africa’s black Victorians or cite their moderation as proof that Africans were forced against their will to consider more extreme methods of liberation later in the century, other commentators are more condescending. The Jabavus, Rubusanas, Molemas, Dubes, perhaps even the Plaatje’s, are sometimes identified as a conservative, at times obsequious elite, who mistakenly placed their faith in the promises of the empire, wrongly believed that they would be able to share in the fruits of civilisation, and naively embraced strategies of patience and moral persuasion in pursuit of those ends.

From the old political left there has long been a suggestion that ‘reformist’ African nationalists, especially those who came under the influence of white liberals, were a bar to more radical class-based forms of organisation and that the interests of petit bourgeois nationalists were at odds with those of workers and peasants. We should treat such criticisms more as political judgements than as fair-minded historical assessments. Africans who placed their hopes in the good intentions of Queen Victoria were not always naïve or misguided. Their leaders were not necessarily wrong to use the language of late-nineteenth-century universalism to call the British Empire to account or to pursue a ‘recuperated sense of imperial civitas’; the real problem was that they lacked the political power to make the promises and guarantees given to them over generations count. It was not unreasonable for a moderate African nationalist like Selope Thema to insist, even in 1922, on claiming ‘our rights of citizenship first as the aboriginals of this country, and second as British subjects.’ Nor was the African leadership mistaken in seeing settler nationalism, particularly in its Afrikaner nationalist guise, as a greater threat to their political ambitions than capitalism or imperialism. Citizenship, property rights and a colour-blind legal system conferred tangible gains; these were not lesser substitutes for more genuine freedoms nor were they mere manifestations of false consciousness. The leading Xhosa praise poet, Samuel Mqhayi, displayed his loyalties when he repeatedly used
the refrain ‘Singami Britani’ (we are Britons) in a poem published in Izwi Labantu during the South African War – which is not to say that he regarded all aspects of British influence in positive terms. Qualities of frustration, irony and ‘subversive complicity’ are readily detectable in the pronouncements of early African nationalists. Similar points may be made for coloured citizens of the Cape, as Bill Nasson has shown in his study of the martyrdom of Abraham Esau, ‘the Coloured Englishman’, during the South African War. Here, in the environs of rural Calvinia, ‘[a] species of Cape British “national” identity bubbled into life’ which, Nasson reminds us, was ‘not simply a passive acting out of imperialist values prescribed from above; it was a means of promoting class pride and a tenacious sense of local independence.’

There were thus sound reasons – explicable in terms of status, class and ideology – for early African nationalists to make a virtue of their Britishness. Traditions of black ‘loyalism and royalism’, as Hilary Sapire indicates in her recent account of the 1947 royal visit to South Africa, may have run deeper and longer than we currently allow, though by this time loyalism had become reflex and nostalgic. Only by applying to constitutionally based, patriarchally inclined, black loyalism the same subtleties and gradations of analysis that historians like Andrew Thompson have applied to colonial and settler variants of loyalism, can we begin to appreciate its range of meanings and applications.

III

Easily overlooked is the fact that Africans who placed their faith in the modernising promise of progress and civilisation were not alone in having their hopes thwarted. This was also true of the most enthusiastic white loyalists who likewise relied heavily on the association between Britishness and progress. Very soon after the conclusion of hostilities in 1902, Milner’s imperious vision of a predominantly British South Africa began to unravel. Historians, Robinson and Gallagher among them, have long taken the view that it never stood a realistic chance. Perhaps so. But we should not forget that South Africa was never more British than in the immediate aftermath of the Boer War – and it was not altogether inconceivable that it should become even more so. Rhodes’ old satrap, Leander Starr Jameson, who had become premier of the Cape in 1902, campaigned with the slogan of ‘Down with the Dutch’ at the election of 1904. Established ultra-loyalist communities in the eastern Cape and in Natal were also emboldened by the war.

Milner correctly understood that securing a prosperous and loyal Transvaal was key to establishing and maintaining British political supremacy in southern Africa, and he geared his reconstruction policies to achieving that end. But there was, among the uitlander community of the Transvaal, a spectrum of British sentiment: some professed outright loyalty to British imperial power whereas others considered themselves Transvaal British first. In the run-up to the war, overwhelming anti-Afrikaner sentiment tended to occlude internal differences, but from 1903 many Transvaal Britons were increasingly inclined to come to a working political arrangement with Afrikaners. As a result they disdained overt championship of imperial supremacy.
Even those who sought British ascendancy could not agree what this should mean in practice. British labourites, for example, were implacably opposed to Milner’s policies on Chinese immigration. But, although Milner’s anglicisation policies were never fully realised and while the South African British remained divided by region, class and ideology, we ought not to mistake the failure of Milner’s ultimate imperialist project with a weakening of English-speaking influence or, in contemporary parlance, of ‘soft power’. The problem with Britishness was not its absence or its weakness so much as the fissile multiplicity of forms that it took.

In demographic terms South Africa more nearly approximated a ‘white man’s country’ in the first three decades of the twentieth century than at any other stage. Its urban centres of power were also more conspicuously Anglophone in these years than at any other time in the twentieth century. The existence of a powerful English-speaking working class on the Transvaal goldmines, which consciously projected itself as British as well as imperial, provided a strong counterpoint to British-born mine owners. This assertive ‘imperial white working class’, proud of its Britishness and its whiteness in equal measure, was strongly associated with the rise of institutionalised racial segregation in South Africa up to the 1920s (there are close parallels here with the contemporaneous ‘White Australia’ policy). While it is a commonplace that unity and common purpose were conspicuously lacking within the plurality of English-speaking political parties and interest groups, this fragmentation did not connote overall cultural or economic weakness – as Afrikaner nationalists well understood. On the contrary, in their eyes it was proof of underlying English or British strength, which is precisely why Afrikaner nationalist exertions during the inter-war years became so geared to solving the problem of white poverty, leading the second trek to the cities, and embracing republicanism.

The South African and First World Wars did much to define the newly emerging British world of the dawning twentieth century. For Australia, New Zealand and Canada, participation in these conflicts showed that was possible to express one’s colonial nationalism through the medium of imperialism. This was the way of Australian nation-building. New Zealanders could become ‘better Britons’, as politicians and opinion-formers in the early years of the twentieth century promised, namely, outdo the mother country (and their Australian cousins) by exemplifying British virtues and eliminating its vices. In South Africa, by contrast, racialised brands of ‘Britannic’ sub-nationalism could not survive the post-Union dispensation without reliving the animosities of the Boer War, and the country’s participation in both world wars became a further powerful source of ethnic division. Unlike New Zealanders and Australians, even Canadians, South Africans would not become neo-Britons in the way that Seeley would have approved of. From 1905, Anglo-Saxon race patriotism or ‘British race sentiment’ was no longer politically viable: the necessity of reconciling Boer and Brits could proceed only within the ethnically inclusive parameters of white South Africanism.

Milner’s own-hand-picked ‘Kindergarten’ was quick to appreciate that the British world had to be reconfigured in a more inclusive and less directive manner than its autocratic hero and mentor allowed. Colonial nationalism, in short, had to be
accommodated. Thus, Milner himself left South Africa in 1905 conceding that ‘the true imperialist is also the best South African’. Others were more amenable to the notion that local patriotism could be compatible with empire loyalism. Percy FitzPatrick, one of the principal uitlander conspirators in the Jameson Raid (as well the most devoted of Milnerites) announced in 1903: ‘I believe in the British Empire ... I believe in this my native land.’

From 1905, many Transvaal Britons, not only the so-called ‘Responsibles’, but the more loyalist ‘Progressives’ too, began to speak the language of conciliation and cooperation. The very same eugenic logic that had been marshalled to prove the inveterate inferiority of the Boer was now reconfigured to demonstrate that Dutch and British came from a common racial stock and that they could meld together to create a vigorous ‘South African type’. Jingoism became the exception rather than the rule; when voiced it was invariably by way of suggestion and euphemism. In the run-up to Union in 1910, the language of common South Africanism, sufficiently capacious to unite Boers and British, not least in opposition to blacks, became the dominant political discourse.

South Africanism had many different inflections, it was broad-based but often shallowly rooted, and its adherents joined the cause as often as not for reasons of opportunism as conviction. But there were strong traditions and generations of experience that it could call on, notably that of the Afrikaner Bond in the Cape. Men like F. S. Malan or J. H. Meiring Beck typified the bi-partisan approach which rejected narrow imperialism and republicanism in favour of a broad South African patriotism. Moderate statesmen like these did much to revivify nineteenth-century Cape colonial nationalism by translating it onto the stage of Union politics. If not actually from the British world, these men were very much of it.

South Africa’s dominion exceptionalism did not mean, therefore, that it would take leave of the British world. The formative experiences of the Milner Kindergarten in South African unification had an enormous influence on the future shape of the Commonwealth. In Jan Smuts and Louis Botha, the emerging Commonwealth had willing supporters. Smuts became a leading statesman of the ‘commonwealth of nations’ (a term that he was responsible for popularising). He attained heroic status in Britain because, as leader of a small but troubled country which had thwarted the power of British imperialism like no other, Ireland excepted, he embodied the redemptive potential of reconciliation. In addition, Smuts demonstrated, more effectively than any other South African could, how the commonwealth connection might be used to redirect and expand local nationalisms into a wider sense of belonging.

In domestic white politics Smuts’s record was rather more complicated. On the one hand his vilification by opponents as the ‘handyman of empire’, and hence the betrayer of the republican cause, rendered him vulnerable to Afrikaner nationalist attack. (Whether he did more to contain or to exacerbate extreme Afrikaner nationalism is worth debating.) At the other end of the white political spectrum, Smuts’s role in containing loyalist sentiment is easily forgotten, not only because of what he did – leading a sharply divided country into two world wars – but merely on account of who he was. Smuts’s commitment to the Commonwealth served to blunt and redirect chauvinist
expressions of loyalism, whether these emanated from dominionites in the last imperial outpost of Natal or from the more centrally placed Unionist party, which was neatly absorbed within the South African Party in 1920–1. The dissolution of the last major political party committed to the empire meant that loyalist sentiment now had to find a voice within the more much more amorphous context of English-speaking South Africanism.

IV

These political realignments in South African politics prompted the emergence of a new political and cultural category, that of ‘English-speaking’ South Africans. The origins of this term are unclear but there is reason to believe it became current as part of the politics of Union in the early twentieth century. The description signalled a withdrawal from more assertive terms – e.g. ‘the British section’, ‘South African British’ or ‘Transvaal British’ – and increasingly became a label for those who were manifestly not members of the primary, Afrikaner nation. It seems also to have been used as a more neutral or formal version of ‘Engelse’, a noun or adjective frequently used disparagingly by Afrikaners or with self-deprecating irony by English-speakers.

The twin shocks of the apartheid government’s victory in 1948 and the country’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1961 raised new questions for English-speaking South Africans. The adjectival term ‘English-speaking South African’ now gained common currency, partly to signify their second-class status. Afrikaner nationalists delighted in goading English-speakers into declaring their loyalties in the language of exclusive dualism: to England or to South Africa. The historian Arthur Keppel-Jones observed in 1948 that ‘[f]rom the Nationalist point of view there is much to be said for using Afrikaner in one case and Engelssprekende [English-speaking] in the other, as implying that one has a nationality and the other only a language.’

After 1948 the category English-speaking South African increasingly took on overtones of political liberalism, notwithstanding the critical role played by English-speakers and imperialists in designing the framework of white supremacy earlier in the century. The misleading assumption that English-speakers were South Africa’s ‘voice of conscience’, or that the ‘English’ press was synonymous with liberal attitudes, was easily turned by Afrikaner nationalists into evidence of disloyalty to the state. Christian-nationalist ideology viewed liberalism as dangerous, part of a spectrum of treasonous tendencies that included communism and imperialist capitalism. English-speaking dominance of the Liberal, United and Progressive Parties helped to make the charge stick.

A sizeable proportion of English-speakers, perhaps the majority, elected to keep a low profile and, over time, took some comfort in their marginalised, minority status. For one thing it seemed to excuse them from complicity in the more odious aspects of apartheid. Notably, English-speaking South Africans were the only group in the category-obsessed apartheid state who avoided being defined in ethnic or national terms. They saw themselves as normal, non-ideological, voices of reason squeezed uncomfortably between the competing pressures of Afrikaner and African
nationalisms. As Noel Garson has pointed out, ‘We do not hear of the Afrikaner contribution to South African history but rather the Afrikaner interpretation. With English-speaking South Africa it is the other way round.’

This form of consoling complacency was challenged in the 1970s when, at least partly in response to the criticisms of black consciousness ideology, neo-Marxist radicals charged their liberal forebears and British imperialism itself as culpable in the design of racial segregation. The criticisms of Afrikaner nationalists, abetted by the barbs of black consciousness intellectuals and the systematic critique of neo-Marxists, roused the ragged English-speaking establishment into mounting something of a defence. At Grahamstown, the symbolic centre of English-settler traditions and institutions, a conference was held in 1974 to define the contribution that English-speakers had made to South African society.

Several writers lamented the political weakness of English-speaking South Africans and pointed to their lack of cohesion: class, occupation, region, religious affiliation and ideology were all identified as being divisive factors. In an atmosphere described as ‘agonized breast beatings’ the tone adopted by many contributors was defensive and rueful. But some participants were more reflective and there were tentative signs of a willingness to define the English-speaking community, not just as the minority 40 per cent of the white population, in more inclusive terms. Justice N. Ogilvie-Thompson’s opening address reminded delegates that the term ‘English-speaking’ was intended to apply to ‘all those to whom English is significant, irrespective of racial origin’. The writer, Anthony Delius, was cited by another contributor for his wry description of English-speaking South Africans as a ‘vague communion’.

To define English-speakers in this way, that is, by reference to political and cultural values, institutions and outlook, is in many respects close to contemporary uses of identity: that is as a multiple, overlapping system of elective affinities. Within such definitions it would be possible to include a small, but not insignificant, number of Afrikaners, Africans, Coloureds and Indians. As Donal Lowry has argued, racial or ethnic ‘non-British’ outsiders could often ‘feel as profound a sense of loyalty to the Crown and Empire as did their Anglo-Protestant compatriots.’

European immigrants as well. Eastern European Jews rapidly acculturated themselves as English-speaking South Africans, which is why the University of Cape Town was sometimes jokingly referred to as the Scottish Mission to the Jews, or why its students came to be known as ‘Ikeys’ – a derogatory term that was quickly adopted as a badge of pride. For the writer Dan Jacobson:

[those] who lived ‘under the British crown’ . . . could think of themselves as attached to, a part of, a political system that exercised worldwide power and was held in worldwide esteem. However insignificant they may have been within that system, they had some kind of obscure claim for consideration, not just wherever they happened to be but all over the place. . . . The crown, the coinage, the bluff envelopes marked ‘On His Majesty’s Service’, the playing of ‘God Save the King’ at the end of cinema performances . . . all this . . . was a source of an enlarged sense of selfhood, even for those who could at best claim to have been stepchildren for the empire.
Used in this way the British world includes in its scope people who would not have called themselves British in any sense of direct connection, race or ancestral stock.\textsuperscript{84} It is manifestly not the racial-ethnic kind of Britishness assumed by nineteenth-century writers on empire like Seeley or Dilke, nor does it set up a notion of Britishness by assessing the extent to which South Africa conformed to other idealised colonies of settlement or expansion, in the way that Froude or Trollope conceived of the neo-Britains.

As Froude found to his disquiet when he visited the Cape, assertions of Britishness or Englishness could run counter to the declared interests of the British state when these were associated with nascent colonial (note, not anti-colonial) nationalism. Late-nineteenth-century anglophone Cape colonial nationalism evinced a form of patriotism – some called it loyalism – which explicitly set itself against rampant forms of authoritarian British imperialism or ultra-loyalism.\textsuperscript{85} It was defined by its cultural expansiveness rather than its commitment to political expansionism. Exemplified by Afrikaners like J. H. Hofmeyr, F. S. Malan and Meiring Beck, Cape colonial nationalism reached full maturity as South Africanism through the enabling environment of the Smutsian white Commonwealth, achieving its apotheosis during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{86} But even the opposing nationalism was more part of the British world than it cared to concede. The Queen’s Afrikaners or the Anglo-men of the Cape were highly respectful of British values and did not necessarily wish to overturn British suzerainty. In the Boer republics, such traditions were also alive until the eve of the Anglo-South African War. African nationalists selectively adapted British cultural and political values to their own needs and, with a mixture of idealism and pragmatism, remained keen to hold Britain to account when promises, explicit and implicit, were not fulfilled.

This mixture of principle and pragmatism was not only adopted by those who saw themselves as ‘step-children’ of empire, to adapt Jacobson’s phrase. It was also true of even the most full-blooded loyalists, namely, those who purported to be, or were disparaged for being, ‘more British than the British’. Recall that it took only a matter of months for the 1820 settlers in the eastern Cape to complain that they had been abandoned by a cynical British government: settler historiography was steeped in a culture of complaint predicated on the idea that British emancipationists and humanitarians were skewing the British government against them. Flag-waving, whether in Grahamstown, Durban or Grahamstown, could be defiant as much as doting or deferential.

Just as liberal-minded intellectuals and politicians presented an idealised version of Britishness, so right-wing loyalism defined itself by reference to abstract notions of Britishness. In both cases these correlated uncertainly with conditions in metropolitan Britain itself. In the post-war era, Britain was often accused not only of betraying its empire, but of betraying itself as well. When George Heaton Nicholls, sugar planter, segregationist and Natal secessionist, became the South African high commissioner to London in 1944, he reflected bitterly on the way in which socialism was rotting the imperial centre to its core. Also troubled by socialism, H. V. Morton, writer of iconic texts like\textit{In Search of England}, moved to South Africa in 1948. To this nostalgic
conservative (in public) and fierce reactionary (in private), South Africa ‘seemed to preserve all that was best about prewar England, but with better weather and a more compliant servant class’. In the age of decolonisation Kenyan settlers, and later Ian Smith in Rhodesia, complained that they, true Churchillian Britons, had been abandoned by a vacillating mother country. The twentieth-century history of Irish Unionism is a further reminder that exaggerated professions of loyalty could easily be translated into cries of betrayal.

V

Because Britishness was often more real in the eyes of the colonial beholder than it was in its core metropolitan constituencies, it may make sense to think of the empire, as ‘our empire’. That is to say, we ought to stop thinking of the term British Empire in the possessive sense – the empire that belonged to Britain – and use it more in the adjectival mode as a mode of description capable of taking into account elective, hyphenated forms of belonging. On this account Britishness emerges as a claim or set of affinities rather than a property inhereing in the person or the group. This descriptive, rather than possessive, use of the phrase the ‘British world’ is close to the meaning sketched out by Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich in their 2003 overview of the subject.

One of the merits of this approach is that it may help to draw a distinction between greater British history and the history of British greatness. Put differently, it may allow us to address not only the question of how British the empire was, but also the ongoing debate about how imperial the British were. At present, this debate seems to be ranged between historians like John Mackenzie and Andrew Thompson, who consider that modern Britain was fundamentally constituted by its empire, and sceptics like Bernard Porter who tend to the view that British politics was for the most part unaffected by its possessions. Yet, a close reading of Absent Minded Imperialists reveals that Bernard Porter allows for the fact that the empire might have meant more to those who experienced it from abroad than it did in the domestic context of British politics. By viewing the empire as New Zealanders from Seddon to Pocock have done, as ‘our empire’, by accepting that Britishness may have loomed larger for Britons and non-Britons overseas than it did for Britons at home, we may arrive at a more satisfactory account of the experience of Britishness.

What does this mean for historians of the British world? Many historians of a parochial, ‘little Englander’ disposition would probably be reasonably content to devolve the experience of empire to those who lived under it. As J. M. Coetzee has recently put it:

The British have simply declared their independence from their imperial forebears. The Empire was long ago abolished, they say, so what is there for us to feel responsible for? And anyway, the people who ran the Empire were Victorians, dour, stiff folk in dark clothes, nothing like us.

Such acts of abnegation should not be welcomed by historians of the British world (even if tempting because it gives them protected space in which to work).
Nor should they endorse the reciprocal tendency of many historians of the wider Britannic world to renounce the empire by retreating to the confines of their national historiographical traditions: it is not long before they bump up against these self-imposed boundaries. This is not, however, to argue that historians of the ex-colonial world should weigh the significance of their own national histories by reference to the extent to which metropolitan British historians acknowledge the importance of the imperial experience – for this would amount only to the historian’s version of the cultural cringe.

If Britishness as a primary identity cannot survive the end of empire, or of the United Kingdom – and there are good grounds to believe it cannot – this does not entail the end of the historically British world. There are sound reasons to push further with the idea of the British world as an interconnected zone of mutual interaction, to keep the colonising and the colonial world in a single field of vision and, in J. G. A. Pocock’s mid-1970s formulation, to write greater British history in terms of the ‘intercultural’ story of ‘conflict and cross-breeding between societies differently based’. Pocock’s more recent proposition, that British history concerns identities ‘never quite at home’, is equally suggestive.

A useful analogy might be drawn between the British world and the flourishing field of Atlantic studies. Here, too, the language of movement, permeability, networks, zones of exchange and transmission predominates, while web-like spatial models challenge older centre-periphery assumptions. Atlantic studies seems to have made more progress than the modern British world in integrating black and African historical experiences into its frame of analysis. This is striking given the fact that, as Trevor Burnard and David Armitage have pointed out (citing Bernard Bailyn), Atlantic history developed out of a conservative post-war imperial historiography which was founded on the notion of white Atlantic civilisations (or ‘western Christendom’) and given fresh political salience by the Cold War. There are uncomfortable parallels to be made, in the case of the British world, with the notion of the Anglosphere propounded by James C. Bennett in his version of the ‘network commonwealth’, the neo-conservative atlanticism of Andrew Roberts or Niall Ferguson’s discombobulated account of ‘anglobalization’.

Implicit in such sinew-stiffening proclamations (notwithstanding qualifications and denials) is a warmed-up version of nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon race or civilisation that runs counter to the permeable notion of Britishness, stripped of claims to moral superiority, for which this paper makes a case. For all its flexibility, we should not lose sight of the fact that Britishness was often oppressive and exclusionary, not least when it claimed universality. We ought, therefore, to preserve a strong sense of political, ideological and institutional frameworks, and to retain workable units such nations and states as well as larger frames of reference. In short, we ought to remain cognisant of the reality, as Zoe Laidlaw reminds us, that networks of power are centred in authority and self interest, not just mutual exchange. In this respect the unsentimental tradition of imperial history, conceived by Robinson and Gallagher as a system of power, remains as pertinent as ever.
Acknowledgements

This paper was delivered as a keynote address to the most recent ‘British World’ conference, held in Bristol in 2007. Trevor Burnard, Donal Lowry and Andrew Thompson have made helpful comments and suggestions as well as correcting many errors.

Notes

[1] See e.g. Bridge and Fedorowich, ‘Mapping the British World’, Buckner and Douglas Francis, Rediscovering the British World and Thompson, Imperial Britain.
[5] The early modern British world provides an exemplar. See Bailyn’s influential call for a ‘rescaling of perspective … in which the basic unit of discussion is larger than any of the traditional units within which research began’. ‘The Challenge of Modern Historiography’, 13.
[8] Ibid., 437. See also Lake, ‘E. A. Freeman (1823–1892)’.
[9] The distinction between ‘citizen subjects’ and ‘subject citizens’ has been attributed to the Australian labour leader and future prime minister J. C. Watson, speaking in 1901. It was also used by Alfred Deakin to distinguish between Australians and Indians respectively. See Hancock, ‘The Commonwealth, 1900–1914’.
[10] For example, the work of Jack Greene, Nicholas Canny, Antony Pagden and Bernard Bailyn.
[11] In Robinson and Gallagher’s seminal article ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, 1–2, ‘[h]istorians such as Seeley and Egerton [who] looked on events in the formal empire as the only test of imperial activity’ are seen as one side of a view of empire they reject; the opposite view, which they likewise reject, is taken by radical opponents of late-Victorian empire such as Hobson, Lenin and Leonard Woolf. See also Wm. Roger Louis’ comment that Robinson and Gallagher ‘expose the central error of earlier historians such as John R. Seeley and Hugh Edward Egerton and untold numbers of historians of the British Empire whose interpretations have been guided by constitutional and racial concepts – the same as those which originally inspired the imperial federation movement’. And ‘[t]hus Robinson and Gallagher differ radically from those historians who emphasize designs for economic exploitation’. Louis (ed.), Imperialism, 6, 8. My response would be that much was lost by not paying attention to these aspects of British imperialism.
[12] This is not to deny that Robinson and Gallagher often made illuminating remarks about individuals and ideas – they frequently did, in passing; it is merely to assert that they seldom developed these themes and did little to stimulate such interests among their followers.
[14] For a thought-provoking new statement of the importance of the dominions, see Hopkins, ‘Rethinking Decolonisation’.
[16] The theory, first essayed in ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, was most fully outlined by Robinson himself in ‘Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism’.
[17] The inadequacy of Robinson’s characterisation of ‘the lone London missionary to the Tswana tribes’ illustrating the mechanism of collaboration at its weakest will be apparent to anyone
who has read, for example, the work of Jean and John Comaroff. ‘At the other extreme’, Robinson’s characterisation of white colonist ‘with the power of an industrial economy behind him’, as ‘the ideal prefabricated collaborator’, is equally deficient. See ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, 124. By contrast, Gallagher’s solo work on local politics in India is far more detailed and subtle.

[18] Stockwell, ed. British Empire, 165. Ballantyne on ‘Colonial Knowledge’ and Jon E. Wilson on ‘Agency, Narrative and Resistance’ (both in this excellent collection) also suggest the way in which the new imperial history has diverged from the Robinson and Gallagher paradigm. But the more general impression given is that Robinson and Gallagher segue easily into the new literature.


[21] Robinson and Gallagher, ‘Partition of Africa’, 70; Africa and the Victorians, 461. This claim has been much contested in South African scholarship, particularly by scholars such as Marks and Trapido and Denoon who have argued that British imperial supremacy in the subcontinent was animated by economic interests. My point is that Robinson and Gallagher are reiterating a longer view of South African exceptionalism.


[27] Lewsen, Selections from the Correspondence of J. X. Merriman, 16; Lewsen, John X. Merriman, 56, 57.

[28] Dunn, James Anthony Froude, 441. See also Goodfellow, Great Britain and South African Confederation, 92.

[29] Burrow, Liberal Descent, 233, 236–37. Burrow is here thinking of America but the point might be extended to colonies on the other side of the Atlantic.


[33] Ibid., 454–55

[34] Ibid., 39, 455.


[37] Milner to Parkin, 28 April, 1897, in Headlam (ed.), Milner Papers, 42; Thornton, Imperial Idea and its Enemies, 79.

[38] Milner to Grey, 7 Aug. 1899, Milner Papers, 476.

[39] Verschoyle, Cecil Rhodes, xxxi. See also Benyon, Proconsul and Paramountcy, 212ff.; Schreuder and Butler, eds. Sir Graham Bower’s Secret History, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ and ch. 2.

[40] Dilke, Problems of Greater Britain, 478, 504.

[41] Robinson and Gallagher, Africa and the Victorians, 231.


[43] Dilke, Problems of Greater Britain, 482.


[45] See e.g. Sturgis, ‘Anglicisation at the Cape of Good Hope’; Denoon, Grand Illusion.
McCacken argues that the identifiably Irish proportion of the white population in 1891 was only 10 per cent of all people of British origin. There were, however, a disproportionate number of Irishmen in prominent positions – as many as a third of Cape governors were Irish – and there were a sizeable number of prominent Irish merchants, politicians and journalists.

My thanks to Donal Lowry for this point.

For the fullest exposition of this theme, see Mackenzie The Scots in South Africa.

Hyslop, ‘Cape Town Highlanders’.

Giliomee, Afrikaners, ch.7

De Villiers, ‘Future Language of South Africa’.


Take, for example, Simons and Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, 429, writing of the ANC leadership in 1930: ‘The conservatives and their white liberal advisers never quite understood their society or its power structure. They persisted in believing against all the evidence that liberation would come to them through reasoned argument, appeals to Christian ethics, and moderate, constitutional protest. Because of timidity … or want of confidence in their people, they refused to mobilize them for mass struggle.’

De Kock, ‘Sitting for the Civilization Test’, 402.

Thema, ‘Race Problem’ 214.


Saunders, ‘African Attitudes to Britain and the Empire’, 145–46. This point is amply explored in Limb’s ‘Early ANC leaders and the British World’, 56–82.

Cf. Lonsdale, ‘Ornamental Constitutionalism in Africa’, 90: ‘To many Africans, the imperial monarchy embodied, or ought to have embodied, constitutional remedy, not holy awe. In a crisis, as in South Africa, it was even worth fighting for.’ Sapire, ‘We Felt We Were in a New South Africa’.

Thompson, ‘Languages of Loyalism in Southern Africa’.

Pyrah, Imperial Policy and South Africa, 184.


Feinstein’s Economic History of South Africa, 259, reveals that the whites constituted just over 20 per cent of the population in the years 1904–30. Table A1.1 indicates that the white population nearly doubled from 632,000 in 1891 to 1,116,800 in 1904.

Hyslop, ‘Imperial Working Class Makes Itself “White”’. 


The concept of ‘Britannic’ identity or nationalism is treated by Darwin in the context of the dominions in ‘Third British Empire’

Ibid., 72.

Dubow, ‘Colonial Nationalism’, 57, 74.
[76] Hancock, Smuts, 203–04.
[78] Keppel-Jones, Friends or Foes?
[80] The conference was timed to mark the opening of the 1820 Settlers National Monument in Grahamstown.
[84] My approach outlined here is somewhat different from that taken by John Lambert who is currently engaged in writing what he intriguingly refers to as a biography of white English-speaking South Africans. It is closer to that taken by Saunders in ‘Britishness in South Africa’.
[86] Dubow, Commonwealth of Knowledge.
[87] Kitty Hauser’s review of In Search of H. V. Morton.
[88] Bridge and Federowich, ‘Mapping the British World’.
[90] Coetzee, Diary of a Bad Year, 44.
[92] Pocock, Discovery of Islands, 23.
[94] Bennett, Anglophone Challenge; Roberts, History of the English-Speaking Peoples; Ferguson, Empire.
[95] Laidlaw, Colonial Connections.

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