

Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Culture* (Melbourne University Press, 2007)

How best to understand the 'British World' and its evolution? This is the overarching historical question loosely uniting a new collection of essays derived from a conference, one of a continuing series, which took place in Melbourne in 2004. The British, of course, spread themselves across the globe over four centuries, and caused great changes everywhere, not least in Australia.

The answers offered in this volume are far removed from any form of structural explanation. Here are found no grand Braudelian views of the global British *imperium* or its demise. Instead we are directed to surface phenomena of the British world, essentially forms of 'British identity' and their shifting meanings and connexions between Britain itself (however conceptualised) and its imperial and post-imperial outliers (mainly restricted to the 'white settler societies', but regrettably omitting the United States, the greatest destination of them all).

British imperialists were undoubtedly concerned about the problem of identity and cohesion amongst their emigrating peoples. In March 1831, the colonial secretary, Viscount Goderich contemplated the ideas of Wakefield for closer settlement in new colonies, notably in South Australia. He declared that 'Nothing would be more unfortunate than the formation of a race of Men, wandering with their Cattle over the extensive Regions of the Interior, and losing like the descendants of the Spaniards in the Pampas of South America, almost all traces of their original Civilization.'¹

In the past few years, historians and sociologists have become entranced with the question of 'identity' which now consumes an alarmingly large proportion of their intellectual resources. This concentration of academic energy is frequently exemplified in the present volume. And thus we find ever-extending varieties of 'Britishness', of 'Anglophilia' and 'Anglophobia', of increasingly refined nuances, 'identifiers' and special constructions of Britishness, together with its 'varied and transformational forms'. Moreover 'identity' comes wrapped up with culture, values and transnational frameworks, all apparently affecting British ways of 'seeing and working on the colonial subject'. They entail 'complex interactions between coloniser and colonised', involving forms of 'expressive Britishness' which also exhibit their own 'mutability', their 'self-images' and their 'fractured and unstable' notions of 'performed realities'.

These subtleties pile up high and include exquisite gradations of symbolic meanings directed at, for instance, 'creolised and hybrid' notions of what it was to 'be British' among people in various arenas of Britishness and Anglicisation. As one contributor suggests, they are dealing with 'the codes of Britain', in a 'vast palimpsest of difference', not to mention the 'differing valency of whiteness' in metropole and colony.

Somehow all this psychologising and phrase-making is designed to expose 'the British Diaspora at work'. Most of the people who populated the 'British

¹ *Australian Historical Records*, series 1, vol. 16, p.116

Diaspora' would have been puzzled by these versions of their lives. And one might also ask whether so much of this concentrated historical energy invested in the construction of identities yields enough in the way of explaining the larger phenomena of the British world.

Britishness Abroad, in the outcome, is a much more varied and palatable smorgasbord of imperial delights than indicated in the introductory commentary. It starts with Bill Schwartz's discussion of the experiences of West Indian immigrants in Birmingham in the 1960s and 70s and the racial tensions which generated large political reverberations in that city. The immigrants seem to have clung to a belief in their essential Britishness despite their frigid reception.

The connections between the chapters are only tenuous. Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson report very clever research into the flows of remittances sent home to Britain by British emigrants in the nineteenth century, noting that those from the United States were significantly more generous than those from the 'neo-Britains'. Combining hard evidence (from Post Office records) with speculation about 'connectedness', they make a persuasive plea for a wider definition of the British World, that is, to include the United States. Stephen Banfield engagingly describes another imperial exchange – three musical examples – the export of organs, the spread of the composition students of Sir Charles Stanford, and the reach of the musical examination systems which operated across the Empire from London and generally persisted even after independence. It is not easy to connect this with the following chapter – an equally fascinating account by Jonathan Hyslop of 27 white labour unionists deported from South Africa in 1914, demonstrating an over-representation of Scots among the militant miners and also the influence of the Australian model of white unionism. In broad terms, Hyslop identifies a strong flow of leftist political ideas between the white bits of the Empire, including the United Kingdom. Also in the South African arena, John MacKenzie wrestles with the question of how Scots coped with the pressures of Anglicisation and 'the production of Britishness'. MacKenzie finds Scots everywhere in South Africa and wants to accommodate them by way of 'multiple identities' and 'complex signifiers' leading to the happier state of 'Anglo-Scotticisation'. More promising is MacKenzie's call for the use of a prosopography of colonial groups which would surely bring greater rigour to the study of the composition and operations of colonial networks.

Yet more elaborate conceptualisations over the meaning of the 'multivalent workings of imperialism' are located in the colony of British Columbia by Adele Perry. She finds that local conditions produced 'fractured identities' on all corners of the imperial impact, not least among the colonisers themselves. Kate Darian-Smith, in similar mode, probes the allegorical iconography of Empire. She discovers widespread 'gendered' representations of imperial power at the end of the nineteenth century. The trouble with symbols is that they are often unclear and this leaves ample scope for ruminations about 'the gendered imaginings of nations', including those of federating Australia. Pat Grimshaw looks more directly at the role of the Christian Women's Temperance Union in late Victorian New Zealand. Women colonists and missionaries were often excellent witnesses to the consequences of the loss of land and the introduction of alcohol among the Maori. Her compelling portrait of Florence Woodhead captures the central tragedy of imperial confrontations on the edge of empire, a story echoed again in Anne Dickson-Waiko's account of colonised women

in New Guinea. This is another chapter which labours under the heavy burden of abstraction – here in the form of a ‘feminist post-colonial investigation of spatial frameworks’. But the research provides a vivid story of the consequences of blundering colonial methods and assumptions which did great damage to the standing of both men and women in the host society.

Quite different is the contribution of David Goodman which focuses on a public meeting in Pittsburgh in 1941, on the very eve of Pearl Harbour. Here American isolationism and Anglophobia converged into ‘a reactive cultural formation’. Goodman digs into the roots of American sensibilities and seems to detect racial elements in ‘the complexities of their relationship with Britain and Britishness’. The question was why the United States should have had any particular interest in the fate of the British *qua* British at that critical moment in the relations between the two countries. Japan quickly provided a decisive answer which had little connection with matters of ‘identity’.

Three decades later the other British world continued to worry about its residual Britishness and its relationship to ‘Settler Colonial Nationalism’. Stuart Ward, from his gantry in Copenhagen, provides an entertaining and droll account of three manifestations of ‘post-colonial disorientation’ – namely local debates about a flag (in Canada), an anthem (in Australia) and a national day (in New Zealand). Each country seemed to be obsessed with its status as a fully-fledged independent post-colonial nation. These local controversies captured their still-divided hearts. Perhaps such rowdy debates finally prove the vitality of ‘identity’ in people’s minds, and thereby justify an awful lot of historical attention, even at the very termination of Empire.

Eric Richards