The British Empire
Causes, conduct and consequences

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Empire remembered

It is with a certain tinge of nostalgia the Empire is evoked in Britain today. This was reflected in the recent bicentennial anniversary of the Slave Trade Act of 1807. The Act, abolishing slave trade across the British Empire, was ahead of its times, but as Peter Cain reminds us in his brief history of the Empire, observations of benign rule tend to conceal its often brutal nature: repressive and authoritarian government was also part of the imperial era. What should be granted, however, was that British imperialism was hardly based on an overarching design of violent expansion. Rather, as Cain observes, the Empire evolved organically and haphazardly, by different standards and logics, often driven by commercial interest, trade and entrepreneurship and guided by a principle of “empire on the cheap.”

This issue of British Politics Review presents a collection of articles on widely different aspects of imperial Britain, reflecting the multiple dimensions of Empire itself. John Erik Fossum, in his contribution, dwells upon Britain’s difficulties in maintaining the loyalty of the Canadian provinces, where French-speaking Quebec posed an additional problem. In a longer perspective, representative democracy based upon British standards would raise an insoluble challenge to Empire itself. National autonomy, on the other hand, remained unattainable for Quebec.

Atle L. Wold accounts for the role of Scotland in running the Empire, which proved to be of great material value to the Scots themselves. The Empire played a vague, but important role in maintaining Britain as a political construct, Wold contends. Kristin M. Haugevik discusses the growth and contraction of the Empire from the perspective of international politics, seeing imperialism as a strategy for enhancing Britain’s role on the world scene. Turning to post-war decolonisation, Øivind Bratberg in his article discusses Labour’s travel towards a responsible party of government, which coincided with the process towards independence for India. Beyond decolonisation, Jeremy A. Crang reflects upon the Falklands War as a late attempt at redressing Britain’s post-imperial loss of prestige. Jakob Lothe, finally, discusses the Nobel Laureates J.M. Coetzee and Doris Lessing as prominent cases of post-colonial literature, an essential part of the legacy that Empire leaves behind.

British imperialism: quotes to remember

Below follow some memorable quotes from observers or executers of imperial rule – each speaking for themselves:

The loss of India would mark and consummate the downfall of the British Empire. The great organism would pass at a stroke out of life into history. From such a catastrophe there could be no recovery.

Winston Churchill (1930), Conservative prime minister 1940-45 and 1951-55

It is fundamental to Socialism that we should liquidate the British Empire as soon as we can.

Sir Stafford Cripps (1936), Labour Chancellor 1947-50

However much we may sympathize with a small nation confronted by a big and powerful neighbours, we cannot in all circumstances undertake to involve the whole British Empire in a war simply on her account.

Neville Chamberlain (1939), Conservative prime minister 1937-40

Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role.

Dean Acheson (1962), American Secretary of State 1949-53

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it.

Joseph Conrad, author (from Heart of Darkness, 1902)

How is the empire?

King George V. (attributed, 1936)
Britain and the Empire: a brief history

By British Politics Review Guest Writer Peter Cain, Research Professor at the Humanities Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University

Peter Cain is a Research Professor at Sheffield Hallam University specialising in British imperial history. Cain has written extensively on the theory and practice of British imperial rule, with British Imperialism, 1688-2000 (2nd ed. 2001, co-written with A. G. Hopkins) as a cornerstone. Combining an interest in Empire with the role of economic ideas, Cain has focused upon intellectual debates around the Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Whether the empire was worth having or not, it is an interesting fact that Britain gave up its empire-centred trade policy from the 1820s onwards in favour of free trade cosmopolitanism, a reflection of the world-wide reach of its exports and of its sources of supply, and that cosmopolitanism was only reluctantly abandoned in favour of empire preferences in the great depression of the 1930s when non-empire trade shrank dramatically.

Almost from the beginning there were two British empires, an empire of settlement – as in America, and Australasia and Southern Africa, - and one where the British were a small ruling minority, first in Asia and the Caribbean and later in Africa. Both were empires of conquest. British emigrants, driven by despair, greed, ambition, or merely the desire for adventure, suborned and eventually eliminated most of the relatively small native populations of America and Australasia.

In Southern Africa, Kenya and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) by contrast the number of the aboriginal inhabitants was large enough to force the white migrants into a grudging, exploitative but enduring relationship with the latter. In Asia and in Africa, resident Britons and other Europeans were never more than a tiny minority of the population. British power thus depended upon its military and naval strength, the prestige that such power brought with it, and the fact that local elites frequently saw that it was in their interests to collaborate with Britain and to learn from them.

"British imperial administrators often had good intentions but their work was frequently undermined by lack of resources: even formal empire was empire on the cheap."

That Indian empire later became of particular importance to Britain because it provided her with an armed force that made her a major military power. Economic penetration led to similar crises with similar outcomes in other parts of Asia and Africa at different times: in Egypt, for example.

Large-scale investment over thirty years led by the late 1870s to financial collapse and sparked off a nationalist/Islamic revolt that appeared to threaten the stability of the Khedival government on which the British relied to protect their economic and strategic interests. Egypt was occupied in 1882 to forestall this and to prevent the country falling into the hands of the French. In this manner, what frequently began as an empire of trade and exploitation in Africa and Asia was slowly, perhaps inevitably, transformed into an empire of governance.

That transformation opened up fresh opportunities for British ruling aristocratic and professional elites to exercise their political and military skills abroad, thus extending the life of their class at home well into the twentieth century.

British imperial administrators often had good intentions but their work was frequently undermined by lack of resources: even formal empire was empire on the cheap. And, although the British imposed order and brought local despotsisms under the rule of law, moves which brought economic and social developments to some parts of West Africa for example, their lack of numbers and capital meant that they relied heavily on local notables to govern and had to conform to their conservative instincts.

Moreover, the conviction of the British authorities that they represented a superior civilisation with a mission to save the benighted natives (an assumption which grew even stronger in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and had a strong racist flavour) led to many inappropriate or mistaken policies and inflamed local nationalisms.

The assumption of the right to civilise also sometimes led to brutal suppression of the native populations, one of the last examples of which was the horrific response to the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s recently revealed by historians.
Far from being just a recent phenomenon, decolonisation was a feature of imperial history from the 18th century onwards. The American Revolution of the 1770s is best seen as a forced decolonisation. Fear in the 19th century that the growing settler colonies might take the American route to freedom was one important reason why they were accorded parliamentary government from the 1840s onwards, a form of decolonisation based on the shrewd judgement that a timely withdrawal of overt political power, together with their dependence on British trade, capital and naval power, would ensure that they would continue to acknowledge the ultimate authority of the British crown.

That judgement bore fruit in the South African war of 1899-1902 and in the two world wars when the Dominions, as they came to be known, spontaneously contributed much-needed supplies of men and resources to the British cause.

The third phase of decolonisation came in the 1940s when India, Pakistan and Burma broke away. They took advantage of Britain’s post-war rapidly increasing economic links with a rejuvenated Western Europe steadily loosened the remaining ties with the settler colonies who, by the late 1960s, were no longer reliant on the mother country economically or strategically. These same forces, together with the growth of nationalist fervour on the frontier and falling interest in empire among the British voting public, also impelled decolonisation in Africa and Asia. The cost of governing and defending these territories, it was now assumed, far outweighed whatever benefits they might bring to the metropole.

Nonetheless, the British always tried to defer leaving until they had put in place a government likely to remain friendly to their remaining interests. The fourth stage of decolonisation can thus be categorised as an attempt to replace formal control with a new informal empire, though, as is obvious in Zimbabwe now, the British have often failed to achieve their aims of retaining influence. It is worth noting that every step in this extended process of decolonisation has presented the mother country with the same paradox.

Britain’s imperial presence was usually justified on the grounds that it brought new freedoms. For their part, when demanding emancipation the colonised justified their claim to independence by invoking their right to those freedoms - which the British argued gave them their right to govern in the first place.

The legacies of empire are many and only a few can be noted here. The empire’s successor, the Commonwealth, provides a forum for a polyglot mixture of nations to come together to discuss issues of global importance. In truth, it is only the palest of shadows of the old empire: but it does reflect the fact that post-imperial Britain still hankers after a world role, as its support for American imperialism and its current embroilment in Iraq and Afghanistan, shows.

Its continuing suspicion of the European Union as something indelibly foreign and restrictive has similar roots in a perception that, somehow, Britain’s role should be wider and grander than that which wholehearted participation in Europe seems to offer.
continued: Britain and the Empire...

By Peter Cain

Besides that, the present global status of the City of London as a financial centre of empire. Britain’s peculiar political institutions, its engaging but infuriating mixture of feudalism and modernity, also owes its survival to some degree to the fact that its traditional ruling elite and its monarchy found new leases of life within the empire for so long; the monarch was, after all, Emperor of India as late as 1948 and Elizabeth is still Queen of Australia (if not for much longer), Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands.

Again, the scale and nature of non-white immigration into Britain since 1950, and its impact in re-shaping the culture of Britain and in raising debates about the nature of ‘Britishness’, cannot be understood without reference to the imperial past.

Overseas, the legacy is complex and disputed and will no doubt remain unclear for a century or two yet, since helping to convey the Enlightenment abroad has been an ambiguous exercise so far: Britons’ self-congratulation about their role in the abolition of the slave trade has tended to obscure the fact that they participated in it for so long beforehand.

Still, the British might even now take some pride in the fact that India has adopted its Parliamentary system and made a success of it when democracies are as yet hard to find outside Europe and America; and it cannot be disputed that what, for most Europeans, is the most perplexing of English games, cricket, has found an abundant new life in many former imperial territories.

However, in the long run the most enduring feature of Britain’s 400-year imperial story may be the spread of English, and its evolution as a new Latin; that is, as a regionally diverse language but one that has a common vibrant core large enough and flexible enough to carry complex messages across the world.

The British Empire: a recent bibliography

Imperial quality. British imperialism is the topic of a broad and ever-growing literature. While traditional accounts largely analysed aspects of political leadership, military organisation and economic affairs, more recent contributions have addressed questions of cultural impact and “Empire from below”. Moreover, debates on the virtues and vices of imperial rule have continued and been further enhanced over the last few years. The contributions listed below are limited to recent additions to the imperialist library.

Among the general accounts of the imperial era, British Imperialism, 1688-2000 by Peter Cain and A.G. Hopkins. (Longman, 2nd edition, 2001) is a good place to start.

In the same vein, Lawrence James’ The Rise and Fall of the British Empire (Abacus, 2nd edition, 1998) gives a comprehensive view, while Ronald Hyam’s Britain’s Imperial Century, 1815-1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion (Palgrave, 3rd edition, 2002) covers the nineteenth century which became essential to the form and development of the British Empire.

Other recent classics in the general area of British imperialism are Bernard Porter’s The Lion’s Share (Longman, 2004) and Niall Ferguson’s Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World (Penguin, 2003). Both contributions take a broad sweep of the high politics of the Victorian era, yet they also questions parts of the established truths about the Empire and the sources and effects of Britain’s policy within it. As an introduction to central historical debates on the British Empire, Robert Johnson’s British Imperialism (Palgrave, 2002) is a useful source.

Here, a number of controversies and queries related to the Empire are debated.

Finally, concerning the end of the Empire, Peter Clarke’s The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire: The Demise of a Superpower, 1944-47 (Allen Lane, 2007) gives a captivating account of the immediate post-war era with the emergence of decolonisation.

Scotland and the Empire, which is also a topic in the present issue of British Politics Review, is covered in T. M. Devine’s Scotland’s Empire 1600-1815, (Penguin, 2003) and Michael Fry’s The Scottish Empire, (2001, Tuckwell Press). On party politics and Empire, much of the contributions are either integrated in books or in article format. Note however The Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France (Princeton University Press, new edition, 2006) and P.S. Gupta’s older contribution on Labour, Imperialism and the British Labour Movement, 1914-1964 (Holmes & Meier, 1975).
Reflections on Britain’s North American legacy
By John Erik Fossum

The nation card. This year Quebec City, the capital of Canada’s province of Quebec, celebrates its 400th anniversary. The anniversary highlights the enduring French presence in Canada and North America. It is easy today to overlook the fact - when Quebec (initially New France, later Lower Canada and now Quebec) with its 5.8 million French-speakers is but a small enclave in a sea of well over 325 million English-speakers (U.S. and Canada together) - that French settlers preceded, and in the early stages greatly outnumbered, English-speakers in what is today’s Canada.

This anniversary offers a good occasion to reflect on the legacy of British rule in North America. How the British Empire did, and should, deal with the strong French presence notably in Quebec has been a recurring theme throughout much of Canada’s gradual move from colony to nation. A brief look at this history reveals that the British defeated the French at Quebec City in the battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759; thereafter Great Britain obtained New France in the Treaty of Paris, 1763.

The ensuing Quebec Act of 1774 enabled the French to retain their language, religion, legal system, and land tenure system. But this arrangement did not settle French-English relations in Canada. French leaders in New France staged a rebellion against the British in 1837. The rebellion was crushed by the British, but the upheavals prompted the British to send John George Lambton, first Earl of Durham, to the colonies to study the conditions there. His report, the famous Durham Report of 1839 (Apzenstat 2006) has been held up as one of the main affairs facing Quebeckers since the defeat at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. In his diagnosis of the problems besetting Lower Canada (Quebec) Lord Durham wrote:

“I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state: I found a struggle, not of principles, but of races; and I perceived that it would be idle to attempt any amelioration of laws or institutions until we could first succeed in terminating the deadly animosity that now separates the inhabitants of Lower Canada into the hostile divisions of French and English.”

The report stated as one of its key recommendations a Union of Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec), based on British representative government. It further stated that Lower Canada must be “thoroughly assimilated to British ways and institutions.”

Is this then the not-so-hidden British ambition: to assimilate all subject peoples to the British cultural mould? Does the report offer an action plan for the assimilation of the French-speakers to the Empire, and in a historical perspective, is the Quebec struggle for independence a prolonged response to this effrontery?

There is an alternative interpretation of the report. After all, it recommended the establishment of institutions of responsible government. Stressing this aspect of the report might come with a different view of Britain, namely as a kind of benign colonial mother that helped set off its Canadian colony on the road to prosperity and modernity.

The Durham Report thus apparently holds two widely different sets of recommendations, which today speak to two very different perceptions of the British legacy in North America. If we consider the report more closely it becomes clear that there were several potentially conflicting aims that Lord Durham sought to reconcile: preservation of empire on the one hand and removing the causes of rebellion in Lower Canada on the other. Many of Durham’s imperial-minded contemporaries saw this as a way of squaring the proverbial circle: there was an unbreachable gap between loyalty and critical voice; and for the sake of the Empire loyalty should definitely take priority.

But in North America this was not only a matter of somehow reconciling loyalty and critical voice. There was also the matter of exit; hence the issue was one of reconciling an exit-voice-loyalty conundrum. The British Empire had to close the “exit option” in North America. One of Durham’s fears was that if the problems of the Canadas were not solved, both Quebeckers and English might opt for exit. The former, he says, could not be relied upon to refrain from seeking support from the Americans:

“How the British Empire did, and should, deal with the strong French presence notably in Quebec, has been a recurring theme throughout much of Canada’s gradual move from colony to nation.”

“There were however several risks associated with this strategy. One was related to the authority of the British Empire, because representative government entailed greater local autonomy; the obvious risk was that representative government would render the imperial connection superfluous. The other loyalty risk was that of instantiating British-style institutions into a society based on French traditions and a French way of life. Would British-style parliamentary rule “travel” well enough? Durham’s Whiggish inclinations predisposed him to believe that they would. Durham’s assimilationist impulse was foremost the modernizer’s impatience with the traditional ways of life, and they were broached at a point in time when there was considerable “civilisational optimism”

The debates on the Durham Report resonate with our contemporary situation: To what extent are political institutions culturally entrenched and to what extent can they be exported to other cultural settings? How, in that case, should that take place? Iraq is only the most obvious example where such assumptions were made but not well enough scrutinised or the ground properly prepared or the process properly carried out.

In Durham’s day it was the fledgling U.S. that played an indirect democratizing role (leading by example and being a constant lure) in instatiating representative government in British North America. Today, the U.S. at its height as imperial power shows less acumen and wisdom in propagating democracy. Can empire ever precipitate viable democracy? Might not the only viable imperial democratizer be the one that exercised self-constraint to the extent of being reined in by rules and laws; hence eventually replacing empire with cosmopolitan law?
Scotland and the Empire: loyalty and enlightened self-interest

By Atle L. Wold

Devoted imperialists. While it is commonplace for people in England and throughout much of the rest of the World, (though never for the Scots, Welsh or Irish), to conflate the terms Britain and England, British and English very few ever refer to the Empire. The Empire is invariably seen as British, notwithstanding the fact that it was English to begin with. A main reason for this is the disproportionately central role the Scots played in the build-up of the Empire after 1707.

Before the Act of Union, the Scottish elite had looked jealously at the up-and-coming English Empire, with which they were prevented from doing trade through the Navigation Acts of 1661. Unable to get a hand in the lucrative trade with the English colonies, the Scots decided to pursue an independent imperial strategy, and set up their own colony at Darien in present-day Panama in 1698. The venture proved a complete fiasco, and with its collapse in 1700 went much of Scotland's liquid wealth. Placed in a new acute financial situation, the Scottish elite looked more firmly than ever towards the English Empire, and the hope of gaining a share in this was a major reason why the leading Scottish politicians in the Parliament at Edinburgh accepted parliamentary union in 1707.

Their hopes materialised to a probably unexpected degree after 1707. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the Scots came to be hugely overrepresented, both in the imperial administration, and in the military forces that were sent out to guard Britain's imperial possessions. Moreover, the Scots dominated in colonial education and medicine, played a central role in commerce, and made up the bulk of new settlers in the colonies - as many as 70% of all settlers were either Scottish or Irish (and many of the Irish were the descendants of Scottish settlers in Ulster).

The Scots were also strongly present among those who sought further imperial expansion. Two main reasons for this prominent position in the Empire were population growth and the relative poverty of the Scots and the Scottish elite when compared to the English. For the third or fourth son of a Scottish laird, the prospects of achieving a financially comfortable life if he stayed at home seemed far less certain than for his peers in England and a career in the imperial service therefore all the more appealing.

Added to this was the supposed martial traditions of the Scots and the contemporary view (often correct) that the Scots were more used to a rough life than their more sedate brethren down south, both of which made them more prepared for the hazards of service abroad. British imperialism thus always had a distinctly Scottish flavour to it, and the determination with which the Scots pursued imperial expansion became evident when a part of the Empire tried to break away in 1776. While most of England remained divided on the issue of whether or not one should accept independence for the American colonies, and the Welsh were largely in favour of letting the colonies go, the Scots overwhelmingly supported military action to subdue the rebellious colonists by force.

For the Scots (and to a lesser extent for the English and Welsh), Great Britain and Empire were thus two very closely linked projects, and it can be argued that the British identity which was forged over the course of the eighteenth century was based on the notion of Britain as an imperial power. The question one might raise then, is what, if any, consequences this has for the British state post Empire? Can the loss of Empire be seen as one cause for the current challenges to the Union? A traditional and somewhat wide-sweeping argument has held that the Scots always saw the British state as a vehicle of convenience and that, when the Empire went, so did the usefulness of the Union (and hence the growth of Scots nationalism about the same time as the Empire was dismantled). Moreover, in a United Kingdom without its Empire, England suddenly seemed much more dominating and threatening than it had done when the playground was the whole of the British Empire.

However this may be, the story of the Scots and the British Empire seems to point towards two central issues in present-day British society and politics: first the need to forge a new kind of Britishness if the Union is to survive; second, that the Empire was a genuinely British enterprise in which all the peoples of the British Isles took part (also the Irish as it happened), and which for that reason cannot be conveniently “blamed” upon the English by Scots separatists today. The keenest imperialists were always the Scots.
From British Empire to Anglo-American hegemony: British imperial history and the struggle for power

A search for supremacy.

According to Hans Morgenthau, often credited as the founder of classical realism within political science, all forms of international politics, are ultimately driven by states’ desire to increase, demonstrate or keep their powers vis-à-vis other states.

Should the aim of a state be to improve its own power position in the international system, it would pursue a policy designed to overthrow the status quo, by seeking more power through geographical expansion (imperialism). If, however, the state already holds a great deal of authority and is more likely to choose a policy of prestige, by seeking to “impress other nations with the power [it] actually possesses, or with the power it believes, or wants the other nations to believe, it possesses”, thus deterring contenders from challenging its position.

Finally, should a state simply aim at maintaining its current power position, it is likely to choose a policy of the status quo, by seeking to conserve the existing power structures into informal practices as well as formal agreements.

It can be argued that all these three policy alternatives are observable in British imperial history. To begin with, England's, and later Britain's, foreign policy between 1600 and 1815 may be interpreted as motivated by an aspiration to overthrow the status quo. During this period, the country pursued an imperialist policy where expansion to new territories and strengthening of its own economic and military resources constituted central parts. From 1606, England colonised large parts of North-America and the Caribbean. This system, primarily based on trade, lasted until 1783 when the thirteen North-American colonies achieved their independence from the British Crown following the American War of Independence. While trade with the former North-American colonies continued, Britain shifted its focus towards Asia and the Pacific.

Upon permission from the powerful Mughal Emperor, the British East India Company established an extremely profitable trade monopoly in India. The Company had been granted an English Royal Charter by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600, and enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from the British government. To begin with, it was run on the basis of key economic principles. With the decline of the Mughal Empire and the defeat of French-supported local opposition groups, however, the Company started behaving as an imperial power.

At the start of the 19th century, no other countries could compete with the strength of the British navy or the primacy of the country's technology, industry, economy, trade and profitable colonies. The combination of these factors made it possible to overpower France in the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), marking the transcendence to Britain's "imperial century" (1815-1914). In this period, Britain's foreign policy can be said to shift to a policy of prestige, where the country by demonstrating its supreme powers and ability to rule discouraged political contenders from challenging its supremacy. In addition to the colonies in Asia, Britain had established colonies in the Pacific and Australasia. In the early and mid-1800s, it also entered the "scramble for Africa", conquering the Cape Colony from the Netherlands in 1807, and later countries such as Sierra Leone, Gambia, the Gold Cost and Lagos. By the time of the collapse of the Empire, Britain controlled as much as one third of the African continent.

Much of the interaction between the world's great powers during the British imperial century took place through The Concert of Europe, an informal communication forum established after the Napoleonic Wars. Due to Britain's pre-eminence, however, it has been argued that the Concert in effect functioned as an instrument for British world governance. In the colonies, British governance was put forth through locally based middlemen with a relatively high degree of independence. This was not least the case with India, where the East India Company by many was considered "an empire within an empire" due to the British government's lack of control over its activities. In 1815, however, the Company's monopoly on trade with India was withdrawn. Between the establishment of the British Raj in the mid-19th century and up until India was formally granted independence from the British Crown in 1947, the British provinces in India were increasingly granted self-government.

The two World Wars marked a new shift in British imperial history, and from 1914 onwards, Britain's grandeur was fading. The eventual collapse of the Empire is commonly explained as the outcome of several processes. They include the two world wars, increased industrial competition as well as domestic economic and social challenges. At the same time, the United States and the Soviet Unions' comparative growth strengthened the impression that the days of British world supremacy were numbered. Nonetheless, Britain seemed to have an ambition to maintain the existing power structures ("the status quo") to the extent possible. Winston Churchill's reminder in 1946 that no-one should underestimate "the abiding power of the British Empire and Commonwealth" suggests such an attitude on the part of the British government. According to several analysts, Britain both was and intended to remain a world power in the mid 1940s.

Assuming that this was in fact the case, it could be argued that the country was faced with three specific policy alternatives. The first was to stay focused on the British Empire and its successor, the Commonwealth of Nations. If successful, such a strategy could help the country secure a position as a "third balance point" against the United States and the Soviet Union. Such a strategy could be feasible if Britain succeeded in conserving some of its old powers into practices and formal agreements - as it did when it achieved one of the exclusive five permanent seats in the UN Security Council.

A second possibility was to establish closer bonds with Europe. When the European integration process began in the early 1950s, however, Britain remained on the outside. As Churchill had famously observed, Britain was "with Europe, but not of it". Later, the country was punished for its reluctance by France's president Charles de Gaulle, who vetoed British applications for membership in the European Community twice, arguing that British membership would function as a brake block for further integration and a "Trojan horse" for American interests. Consequently, Britain found itself on the sidelines – first by choice and later unwillingly – in the early years of the integration project that was to become today's EU.

Britain's choice, therefore, fell on its third strategic alternative: To recognize the United States’ taking over of the world hegemony, and instead seek to maintain some of its own influence by befriending the new superpower. In 1946, Churchill became the first to launch the idea of a "special relationship" between his own country and the United States. Since then, the existence of an Anglo-American alliance, unique in both content and scope, has been confirmed by numerous British and American state leaders. According to William Wallace, the establishment of an "Anglo-American hegemony" has undoubtedly helped Britain's maintain its influence on world politics.

Hence, in sum, Britain's imperial history exemplifies well the three power-seeking strategies suggested by Morgenthau. First, the effort to overthrow the status quo in the 17th and 18th century through imperialism; secondly, the policy of prestige through firm governance and power demonstration in its imperial century between 1815-1814; and finally the policy of the status quo by befriending the new superpower and thus preserving some of its influence and powers.
“We have ceased to be a nation in retreat”: the Falklands war 1982

By Jeremy A. Crang

Empire’s last call. In 1982 the British government fought a short but fierce colonial war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands – a little known British dependent territory in the South Atlantic 8,000 miles from the United Kingdom and 300 miles from the Argentine coast. To many neutrals it seemed the most unlikely of conflicts - “like two bald men fighting over a comb” remarked Jorge Luis Borges – but for Margaret Thatcher it represented the greatest crisis of her premiership. “The fate of the country was not at stake in the Falklands”, notes Lawrence Freedman, “but the fate of the government was”.

Britain and Argentina had been in dispute over the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands since the mid-nineteenth century. But in the early 1980s matters came to a head. The British maintained that they had a strong historic title to the Falklands; that they had peacefully occupied the islands for 150 years; and that the 1,800 inhabitants - the overwhelming majority of whom were of British stock – fervently desired to remain under British administration. In contrast, the Argentines contended that Spain had a better historic claim on the Falklands than Britain and they had inherited this right of ownership on independence; that the British occupation of the islands in 1833 was “illegal”; and that their geographical proximity to the South American mainland made them logically part of Argentina.

On 2 April 1982 General Leopoldo Galtieri’s junta, frustrated by continuing British intransigence over the Falklands question, and facing mounting domestic unrest, launched a military invasion of the islands. Within hours the small Royal Marines garrison had been overrun. In Buenos Aires the thousands of jubilant Argentines celebrated the repatriation of the “Islas Malvinas”.

Mrs Thatcher, stung by this national humiliation, outraged that British territory had been seized in this fashion, and appalled at the prospect of the islanders being forced to live under an Argentine military dictatorship, immediately dispatched a naval task force to the South Atlantic. In the meantime, diplomatic efforts were made to resolve the crisis. General Alexander Haig, the US Secretary of State, shuttled between Britain and Argentina in the hope of bringing about a peaceful settlement. Neither side would back down and at the end of April the US sided with Britain. On 2 May hostilities began in earnest. A British nuclear submarine patrolling south of the Falklands sunk the Argentine cruiser, the General Belgrano, with the loss of over 300 lives.

On 21 May British troops landed at San Carlos on East Falkland. After consolidating the beachhead, during which time the Argentine air force mounted repeated attacks on the Royal Navy warships guarding the landing zone, the advance inland began. Having secured Goose Green, the British troops moved into position around Port Stanley and on the nights of 11-12 and 13-14 June fought a series of battles for the high ground to the west of the capital: Mount Longdon, Two Sisters, Mount Harriet, Mount Tumbledown and Wireless Ridge.

These actions involved advancing up rocky outcrops and attacking well-defended Argentine positions in bitter close-quarter fighting. Some of the Argentines put up determined resistance, but the professionalism of the British troops - in particular the elite units of the Royal Marines and the Parachute Regiment - won the day. On 14 June the Argentine garrison surrendered and Port Stanley was liberated. In total, 649 Argentine and 253 British personnel were killed during the campaign.

Most commentators agree that the Falklands war represented a turning point for Mrs Thatcher. If the British government had failed to recover the islands, she might well have been forced to resign. As it was, the war gave her a tremendous political boost. Before the crisis the Conservative government was deeply unpopular and languishing in the opinion polls. But the Prime Minister’s resolute leadership during the conflict, and the opportunity it gave her to create a sense of national renewal - “we have”, she claimed, “ceased to be a nation in retreat” - contributed to a substantial surge in support which saw the Conservatives returned with a huge majority in the 1983 general election. Indeed, in the view of her biographer, John Campbell, the events in the South Atlantic “defined her premiership and set her on a pedestal of electoral invincibility from which she was not toppled for another eight years”.

The Falklands question lingers on. Although Britain re-established diplomatic relations with Argentina in 1990, and the ban on Argentine visitors to the islanders was lifted in 1999, a solution to the sovereignty dispute seems as far off as ever. Argentina continues to assert its claims on the islands. Britain is adamant that they will remain under the crown. In his New Year’s message to the Falkland islanders in December 2007 Gordon Brown declared that “I have no doubts about the UK’s sovereignty over the Falkland Islands and undertake to uphold your security and everything you have worked so hard to achieve over the past twenty-five years.”

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A case for war. 1,800 inhabitants (1982), 12,000 square kilometres - reasserted under British rule in 1833: the Falkland Islands.

Further reading

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By Jeremy A. Crang
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Labour, imperialism and India: a long journey

By Øivind Bratberg

Empire on the left. How does imperialism fit with the ideas of a left-of-centre party? How are the contradictions of imperial rule handled when that party yearns for – and indeed reaches – governmental power? The challenge is reflected in the British Labour Party’s march towards power in the first half of the 20th century, a journey which reached its destination just as the dismantling of the Empire really began.

Foreign policy was a vaguely defined area in Labour, a party geared more towards domestic reform than towards any coherent vision of global politics. As demonstrated by many leftist parties, handling foreign policy well has often been a key test of a party’s maturity for office. This observation has extra validity when the foreign policy in question is that of the world’s greatest colonial power, as was the case with Britain at the time in the early 1900s. When Labour finally obtained a majority government in 1945, the party was to show that responsible government with hints of radicalism could work well.

Denis Healey, later to become a defence secretary and chancellor in successive Labour governments, noted in 1952 “[t]hat external factors would one day dominate British politics was never conceived by the founders of British socialism”. The Fabians, the main intellectual vein in the party, had according to Healey “found socialism wandering aimlessly in Cloud Cuckoo land and set it working on the gas and water problems of the nearest town or village. The modern Welfare State is their monument.”

Healey’s point was that social justice, housing, healthcare and wage levels were all important in building a support base. Foreign policy was as a platform for government. Competent foreign policy would give an essential contribution. The particular international dimension of Labour reflected an intelligentsia that was ambivalent to power politics and uncertain of the merits of Empire. On imperialism a broad range of ideas coexisted within the party. Should civilisation and British-style institutions be dispersed through imperial rule? Should the British working class aim to ally with underprivileged classes among the colonised peoples? What distinction should a Socialist perspective draw between settler-based and indigenous colonies? The reader may be familiar with J.A. Hobson, whose account of Imperialism (1902) became the source for theoretical debates and an inspiration for Vladimir Lenin's later elaborations on Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism (1916). According to Hobson, the capitalist system was a driving force of imperialism through its drive for raw material, markets and targets for investment. To Lenin, this was the point where the nation state became too small and imperialisms would clash.

Socialism would of course represent an alternative path of development. To Labour, however, the structural feature of Empire was already there. The question was how this political construction should be organised, in order to serve a range of parallel aims: international peace and security, economic growth and as a desire to help the colonial peoples develop.

How should the colonies develop? James Ramsay MacDonald, Labour’s first prime minister in 1924, wrote of an “imperial standard” of democratic government, rule of law and civic rights which colonies should be measured against, and which should form the basis for eventual autonomy. On the one side in his party were those who promoted the immediate and modern welfare to backward colonies. On the other were progressives eager to bring civilisation and modern welfare to backward colonies. Lurking behind the debate were awkward ideas about racial inequality, often related to Britain’s colonial possessions in Africa.

Participation in Winston Churchill’s national administration during the Second World War was a highly useful experience for Labour in clarifying foreign policy priorities. With the arrival of Clement Attlee’s government in 1945, Labour would be put to the test against the speedy transition to a Cold War context as well as the beginning of decolonisation. In Ernest Bevin the party was to have a foreign secretary calibrated to the new era of great power politics. One of the chief challenges facing the government was the India question.

The future position for India had accompanied British politics since the early inter-war period. For obvious reasons, letting Indians disembark from the Empire held a huge symbolic significance. Territorially as well as mythologically, this was the beginning of the end of British imperial glory. Yet, it was also a vital issue of statesmanship to resolve the question peacefully and, in Labour’s case, to build a solid justification for doing so, rooted not only in realpolitik or national pride but also in social democracy.

The process towards independence for India moved rapidly between the summer of 1945 and the winter of 1947, involving Attlee himself, the India Office, the successive Viceroys in Delhi - Viscount Wavell (1943-47) and Viscount Mountbatten (1947) - and, on the opposite side, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. It is worth reflecting on the scale of the transition from imperial rule to independence for India and Pakistan, which was declared on 15 August 1947 (and accompanied by mutual killings between Hindus and Muslims on a frightening scale). Meanwhile, a different kind of transition had also occurred within British politics, where Labour was now in office responsible for disestablishing the cornerstone of the British Empire.

The Conservative Party, habitually responsible for running the Empire, watched the India débacle debilitated and dismayed from the opposition benches. Winston Churchill stated in the House of Commons on 6 March 1947 against Attlee, whom he had one described as “a modest man who has a lot to be modest about”:

“Many have defended Britain against her foes. None can defend her against herself. We must face the evils that are coming upon us, and that we are powerless to avert… But, at least, let us not add – by shameful flight, by a premature, hurried scuttle – at least let us not add, to the pangs of sorrow so many if we feel, the tart and smear of shame.”

Attlee, in his reply, acknowledged the escalating violence in India but maintained that “the time has come when Indians must shoulder their responsibility”. Moreover, he contended, “anyone who has read the lives of the great men who have built up our rule in India and who did so much to make India united will know that all those great men looked to the fulfilment of our mission in India, and the placing of responsibility for their own lives in Indian hands”.

A time for transition indeed: Britain’s Indian venture and Labour’s journey to statesmanship reached a common destination under Attlee’s premiership, which proved to be a milestone in 20th century British politics.
Postcolonial literature and the Empire: the examples of J. M. Coetzee and Doris Lessing

By Jakob Lothe

Literature after Empire.

The legacy of the British Empire is remarkably complex – not least in the Empire is remarkably literatures written in English.

In this short article I want to comment on the ways in which this legacy is observable in the work of two eminent contemporary writers of English literature, J. M. Coetzee and Doris Lessing, both of whom have been awarded the Nobel Prize. Due to the brevity of this discussion, I restrict myself to making some observations on the two authors’ biographies, then proceeding to comment on one representative text written in English.

I suggest, however, that there are significant echoes of the Empire in the writings of Coetzee and Lessing. These echoes constitute an important feature of the complex thematic work.

When Coetzee was born in South Africa in 1940, Great Britain, though under great pressure in the war against Nazi Germany, was still an Empire. Coetzee learnt English as a child, and even though his background was South African his identity was in a way British, and in one sense even American. He studied in the United States, and worked for a period in Great Britain before returning to South Africa. Since the nation’s regime was that of apartheid – a deeply unjust system which enabled a minority to appropriate a term used by Michel Foucault, of whites to remain in power until 1993 – Coetzee lived in a place, a particular region to appropriate a term used by Michel Foucault, in which the mechanisms of colonialism and Empire still were still operative. There was something curiously anachronistic about South African apartheid, and significant aspects of this political system are linked to constituent elements of the Empire.

An illustrative example of a fictional representation of Empire is Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), one of the most important books Coetzee wrote under apartheid. In this parabolic text, the inhabitants of an unnamed Empire are waiting for what they believe to be an imminent attack by the “barbarians” outside the border. That these so-called “barbarians” are actually fishermen and nomads does not prevent Colonel Joll, the officer who represents and in a way even personifies the Empire, to insistently pursue them in order to capture and torture those he can find. The novel’s narrator is the Magistrate of a small settlement situated on the Empire’s border – thus we hear his voice and see everything through his eyes.

As a Magistrate the narrator, who also becomes the novel’s main character, is part of the Empire. However, since he increasingly feels the need to distance himself from Colonel Joll because of the latter’s use of violence against the “barbarians”, he is also tortured himself. Paradoxically, by becoming like the “barbarians” he becomes less of a barbarian than Joll. In this masterly novel, the Magistrate has to negotiate difficult issues of identity and loyalty, problems which he does not manage to resolve. Although we should be wary of comparing an invented, literary character with those of real history, and although South Africa is never mentioned in Waiting for the Barbarians, in some ways the Magistrate’s situation is comparable to that of (still) privileged whites living in South Africa today.

In common with Coetzee, Doris Lessing also spent her childhood far from the imperial centre. She was born in 1919 in Persia (now Iran) of British parents who moved when she was five years old to a farm in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). In contrast to Coetzee, Lessing left school at an early age and had various jobs in Salisbury, the capital of what was then a British colony. (Although Zimbabwe has now been independent for many years, the country’s controversial leader, Robert Mugabe, still frequently refers to Britain as a colonial power of which he is extremely critical.) In 1949 Lessing made the decision of going to Britain with her youngest child, leaving the older children behind in Southern Rhodesia. She has later explained this dramatic act by referring to her failed marriages, adding that her growing dissatisfaction with the colonial regime made her feel uneasy at home.

For Lessing as for Coetzee, and certainly for many of the characters in their fictional works, it is not easy to ascertain what it means to be “at home”. Leaving the colony of Rhodesia, Lessing in one obvious sense left her home, but in a different yet related sense she moved to another “home” – the centre of the Empire. In actual fact, however, Lessing probably did not feel entirely or unproblematically at home in either of these places. The problem of identity, which in Lessing’s work is inseparable from the issues of gender and class, is also closely linked to the need to belong somewhere – and to the problem of not experiencing a sense of belonging.

In a thoughtful essay published in Dagbladet on 13 November 1975, the Norwegian author Johan Borgen predicted that Lessing would receive the Nobel Prize for literature the following year (“Doris Lessing er neste års Nobels prisvinner”). Interestingly, when she was awarded the prize at last in 2008, this event led to an increased interest in a novel which Borgen rightly considers as one of her finest, The Grass is Singing (1950).

While Waiting for the Barbarians begins by presenting a confrontation between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll, The Grass is Singing opens thus: “MURDER MYSTERY. By Special Correspondent. Mary Turner, the wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Ngisi, was found murdered on the front verandah of their homestead yesterday morning. The houseboy, who has been arrested, has confessed to the crime. No motive has been discovered”. As we can see, Lessing begins her novel by quoting from a newspaper report. Thus the reader is confronted with a “murder mystery”, in contrast to a crime novel, however, we are told immediately who the murderer is. In the discourse of the novel, the murder takes place at the very end. And yet we read and reread an engrossing and disturbing narrative.

Why did the servant murder Mary Turner? We do not know, and not meant to know either. What we do know is that she is white and he is black, and we sense that the racial difference – or more precisely, their different ethnic affiliations and identities – are one important reason why the relationship, if so it can be called, is doomed to failure in the setting of South Africa. Seen thus, the novel is a fictional representation of a significant aspect of apartheid, which is, disturbingly, one facet of the legacy of the Empire.
On 15 April 2008, British Politics Society, Norway hosted a seminar at the University of Oslo to mark the 35 years of British EU membership. A core theme for the seminar was the extent to which Britain has remained an “awkward” partner in the EU and whether European integration has changed the context and scope for British politics. Before an interested audience, keynote speakers were the Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke, British MP and former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Dr Ian Bache from the University of Sheffield and Marit Nybakk, Norwegian MP.

Kenneth Clarke shared some of his views on why Britain has found it difficult to engage in the project of European integration, dwelling in particular with the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 90s. Clarke also noted the inherent scepticism towards Europe in parts of the press and the retreat towards the cautious centre ground to which both Labour and the Conservatives have been prone. A defining moment for the British EU debate, according to Clarke, occurred in 1991/92 as the Maastricht Treaty was approved by a government which in the process turned increasingly Euro sceptic. Internal party conflict and an indifferent, if not hostile, electorate has in many cases led to inactivism in Europe, often against Britain’s own interest.

Ian Bache called attention to another part of the story, observing that while Britain is often portrayed as a reluctant EU-member, there has nevertheless been a process of “Europeanisation” of British politics, which has transformed the way in which government ministries and different parts of the civil society relate to Europe. This adaptation to the EU has partly been driven by political strategy - particularly under the Blair government - but to a larger degree, it has been part of a dynamic beyond the debates, or “below the radar” of British politics.

Marit Nybakk offered some reflections on the Norwegian EU debate and the bilateral relationship between Norway and Britain. Arguing that few countries apart from the Nordic countries match Norway’s close relationship with Britain, she referred to international aid, foreign and security policy, environment and energy as essential fields of cooperation. Calling for a stronger focus on the political aims and ambitions shared by the two countries, Nybakk emphasised that cooperation must lean on the membership of various international organisations where Britain and Norway take part.

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