

assumptions of US liberals (and perhaps of British liberals too?) that private enterprise is better than the public sphere at producing social goods, asks for a renewed focus on public education especially for the earliest years as a way to promote a liberal society, and tries to revive the reader's confidence that national health insurance, the ending of gun violence and higher education accessible to all can be achieved. He closes with a panegyric to liberalism: 'liberalism isn't a political theory applied to life. It's what we know about life applied to a political theory ... liberalism ... continues to produce those thousand small sanities in often

invisible social adjustments, moving us bit by bit a little bit closer to a modern Arcadia.' An entertaining and informative read; I would recommend it. It's not really a history but rather a superb piece of polemic that makes a good case for liberalism as the ideology that the reader should follow as well as providing them with the arguments to respond to the counter blasts of both left and right.

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In Birmingham, however, one struggles to see much evidence of interest in the cause. A petition, organised by the Birmingham Anti-Racist Campaign, to remove statues which 'glorify those linked with slavery and British colonial history' has received a mere 653 signatures. Although the University of Birmingham did hold a seminar to discuss the problematic legacy of its first chancellor, Joseph Chamberlain, its clock tower, its staff bar, one of its newest halls of residence and even its undergraduate financial support scheme are still named after the ardent imperialist and architect of the Second Boer War. When I organised the centenary conference to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the death of Joseph Chamberlain in 2014 and chaired a number of papers critical of Chamberlain's politics and personality, it was clear that many people in his adopted city still regarded any criticism of 'our Joe' as akin to blasphemy.

Although Chamberlain's imperial enthusiasms are finally being called into question (albeit rather reluctantly) by organisations such as the Chamberlain Highbury Trust, George Dawson's reputation as an advocate of popular education, social reform and the father of the 'Civic Gospel' with which late Victorian Birmingham is identified, appears, at first glance, to be less problematic. This is certainly why a major cultural project run by the University

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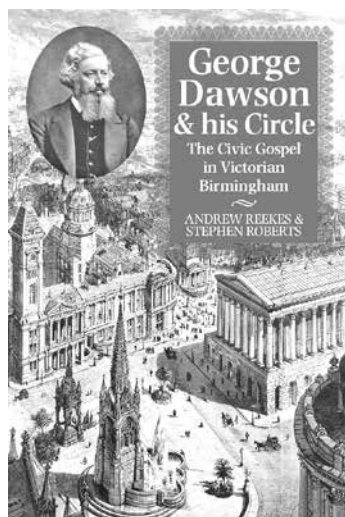
## 'Everything to Everybody'

Andrew Reekes and Stephen Roberts, *George Dawson and His Circle* (Merlin Press, 2021)

Review by **Ian Cawood**

**W**HEN ONE WALKS around British cities in 2022, one is instantly made aware that the civic spaces that have been uncontested for decades are now increasingly the site of bitter arguments between those who seek to question the appropriateness of monuments to certain historical figures and those who regard any interference with the physical heritage of a city as a damaging attempt to 'rewrite' history. The toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020 was

the most dramatic outcome of this disagreement, while protests against the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford and that of Henry Dundas, Lord Melville, in Edinburgh, have led to the installation of new plaques, offering a less celebratory assessment of these figures. In Edinburgh, the city council has established a 'Slavery and Colonialism Legacy' review which is asking its citizens to decide what should be done to address issues of historical injustice, including the option to remove certain statues to museums.



of Birmingham and the Library of Birmingham, funded by the National Lottery, which marks Birmingham's hosting of the Commonwealth Games in 2022 is based on his message 'Everything to Everybody.' It also explains the publication of this curious collection of biographical studies of those who either worshipped at Dawson's Church of the Saviour, or who were inspired by his message that 'a great town exists to discharge towards the people of that town the duties that a great nation exists to discharge towards the people of that nation.'

Although there is much new research on comparatively unknown figures such as William Aitken, Samuel Timmons and Edward Taylor, there is, as the authors acknowledge 'a certain amount of unavoidable repetition' between the biographical chapters. This is somewhat wearisome, especially when a description of the mosaic on the front of the

Council House is repeated within ten pages. This might be more forgivable, if certain episodes in the lives of the individuals described were not notably omitted. Rather than creating 'a more democratic system', Benjamin Harris's Birmingham Liberal Association was actually accused of being 'dictatorial and tyrannical' by W. J. Davis, the leader of the Brass Workers' Union. John Jaffray's 1892 knighthood may have been described as earned by his public work, but only in his own newspaper, the *Birmingham Mail*. Most knew that it was given by outgoing Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury for his funding of the nascent Liberal Unionist party, which had kept the minority Conservative party in power for seven years.

The introduction to this collection admits that 'white males dominate this book's narrative' and does attempt to address this with a chapter on the little-known Marie Bethell Beauclerc, Dawson's secretary, written by Nicola Gauld, author of an excellent recent study of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Movement. However, in light of Anne Rodrick's 2004 revisionist study of the civic culture of Victorian Birmingham, in which she argued that the paternal actions of the Corporation were still aimed at the 'deserving' poor, who were expected to show due fealty to their masters, the collection did need, at least, to consider

that the 'Civic Gospel' was largely designed for the benefit of upper-middle-class businessmen. After all, the physical embodiment of the gospel of 'Improvement' in Birmingham, Corporation Street, was a Parisian-style boulevard with theatres, shops and winter gardens, which was built by demolishing 653 slum homes of the poor, with less than 100 houses built by the council to rehome them in the following ten years. In 1901, the *Birmingham Gazette* published a horrifying description of 'Scenes in Slumland' and asked 'what wonder that drink becomes a second refuge? What wonder that the innocent are soon contaminated and that crime and violence are so rampant?'

More seriously, for a history of Victorian culture written in the twenty first century, there is little evidence in the collection of an awareness of the post-colonial critique of the 'Civic Gospel'. Terms such as 'culture', 'mission' and 'citizens' are used rather too freely and uncritically, without an appreciation of the exclusionary nature of these labels, as Catherine Hall and others have explored. Although Andy Green probably went too far in claiming that Dawson 'had paved the way for a later breed of ruthless empire builders in Birmingham that included, of course, Joseph Chamberlain', it must be acknowledged that Dawson held views on race that many in modern Birmingham would find repugnant. At the 1862

unveiling of a statue to the abolitionist, Joseph Sturge, Dawson commented on Sturge's fondness for 'negroes, and all sorts of low and unlovely people.' Green contends the Dawson's enthusiasm for Shakespeare, which he promoted across the world, was actually part of 'a rigid belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority and civilisation.' He supported this claim that Dawson shared the racist views of his mentor, Thomas Carlyle, by quoting comments that Dawson made to a local newspaper during his visit to the United States in 1874 regarding the inability of black people to educate themselves and the superiority of European races. As a result of reading this article, Professor Ewan Fernie, who heads the 'Everything to Everybody'

project, cancelled plans for a restoration of Dawson's statue and used the funds to commission a series of murals at local primary schools, designed by the pupils and a local arts collective. In light of this decision, it is something of a mystery why Professor Fernie contributed such a hagiographic chapter on Dawson to this collection, but then one cannot see much of an audience for this very dated text outside the city that still clings to its imperial heroes.

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Zealand), conquest (India) or free trade, based on economic dominance and informal rule (China and parts of South America). The British Empire faced a range of pressures from interests as varied as slave owners, anti-slavery campaigners, Christian missionaries, capitalists and colonial settlers. Governing it meant a sense of constant anxiety whether due to fear of rebellion from within or encroachment from without by rival European powers. There was no golden age of imperial stability.

The complexities of imperial governance are vividly illustrated by the authors of *Ruling the World*: eminent imperial historian Alan Lester and his research assistants and co-authors Kate Boehm and Stephen Mitchell. Rather than writing another narrative history of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, they focus on the practicalities and challenges of governing the empire from the vantage point of the colonial office in three significant years, 1838, 1857 and 1879, described respectively as the years of 'freedom', 'civilisation' and 'liberalism'.

There is a degree of irony in the choice of terms. To a large extent the Indian Uprising of 1857 was a trigger for the abandonment of attempts by the imperial government to impose British 'civilisation' on India, while 1879 saw imperial wars in South Africa and Afghanistan that were the antithesis of liberalism. In

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## The complexities of imperial governance

Alan Lester, Kate Boehme and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-century British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Review by **Iain Sharpe**

**O**NE OF THE COMMONEST images that comes to mind when the British Empire is mentioned is the map of the world, supposedly hung on every classroom wall, with large swathes – up to a quarter of the world – coloured red or pink. It conjures up the idea of the empire as a unified

entity, with large swathes of territory across the globe being ruled directly from London. In fact, it was varied and diffuse in how and when its territory had been acquired and in how it was governed. Imperial territories came in different forms, whether those of settlement (Canada, Australia, New