

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

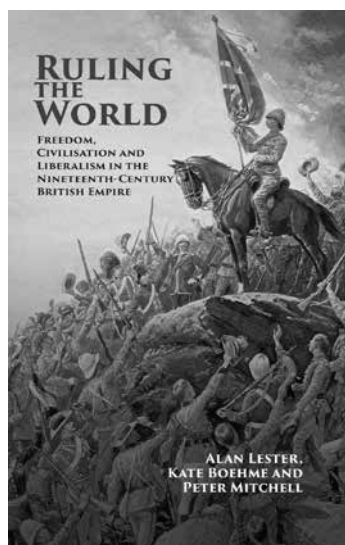
The complexities of imperial governance

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**

ONE 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



fact, the author's designation of that as the year of liberalism is forced, given that it was the only one of the three covered in this book where there was actually a Conservative government. I am sure that Disraeli or Salisbury had few enough pretensions to liberalism. Yet the broad approach of focusing on three separate years over a forty-year period is an inspired one, enabling the authors to convey a sense of the immediate pressures involved in maintaining an empire, while still offering a longer view of how the empire changed over time due to changes in culture, geopolitical conditions or technological advances.

The real strength of the book is in its detailed portrayal of the pressures and range of issues faced by those charged with imperial governance. It is based on considerable archival research, particularly in the Colonial Office and India Office records. But this is no

dry administrative history. The authors bring to life the background and personalities of the key figures involved in imperial administration – indeed they helpfully include a cast of characters as an appendix. Most prominent among these is James Stephen, permanent under-secretary at the Colonial Office in from 1836 to 1847 and the central figure of the first and longest section of the book, dealing with 1838. Described as a 'shy workaholic', Stephen was the evangelical Christian son of an anti-slavery campaigner. Stephen had drafted the complex bill that became the Act of Parliament abolishing slavery in the Dominions over the course of a weekend – one of two occasions in his life where he worked on the Sabbath.

In 1838, Stephen was preparing for the emancipation of slaves across the British Empire – the 1833 Act abolishing slavery having deferred their full freedom until after former slaves had served a period of 'apprenticeship'. In many ways, 1838 marked a high point of humanitarian concern for the British Empire's non-white subjects. Cases of brutal treatment of native peoples by white settlers especially in New Zealand, Australia and South Africa led to the creation of a Parliamentary Select Committee on Aborigines in 1835, which produced a celebrated report two years later. In 1838, the Aborigines Protection Society was founded and for a brief time measures to protect the land and freedom of

native peoples from brutality and land grabbing by white settlers seemed to hold sway.

Yet it was also a time when pressure from white settlers for colonial self-government was building. Following settler rebellions in Canada the previous year, the metropolitan government commissioned a report by the Earl of Durham which recommended the grant of responsible government. A land grab by settlers in Cape Colony was thwarted by the London government, while attempts to protect aboriginal populations in Australia and New Zealand provoked demands for self-government to be free of interference from the imperial government. Despite his strong humanitarian credentials, Stephen was forced to balance a range of competing pressures and always subject to the demands of realpolitik.

In practice, indigenous populations almost always lost out to white settler interests. For the government in London, the latter had to be kept sweet in order to keep them within the empire. At the same time, contemporary demand for economy and the reality that settlers had the advantage of being on the spot made it impossible for the metropolitan government to control them directly. Demands for colonial self-government proved too costly to resist and granting it could be presented as advancing political freedom, even if in practice such freedom was limited to white populations.