

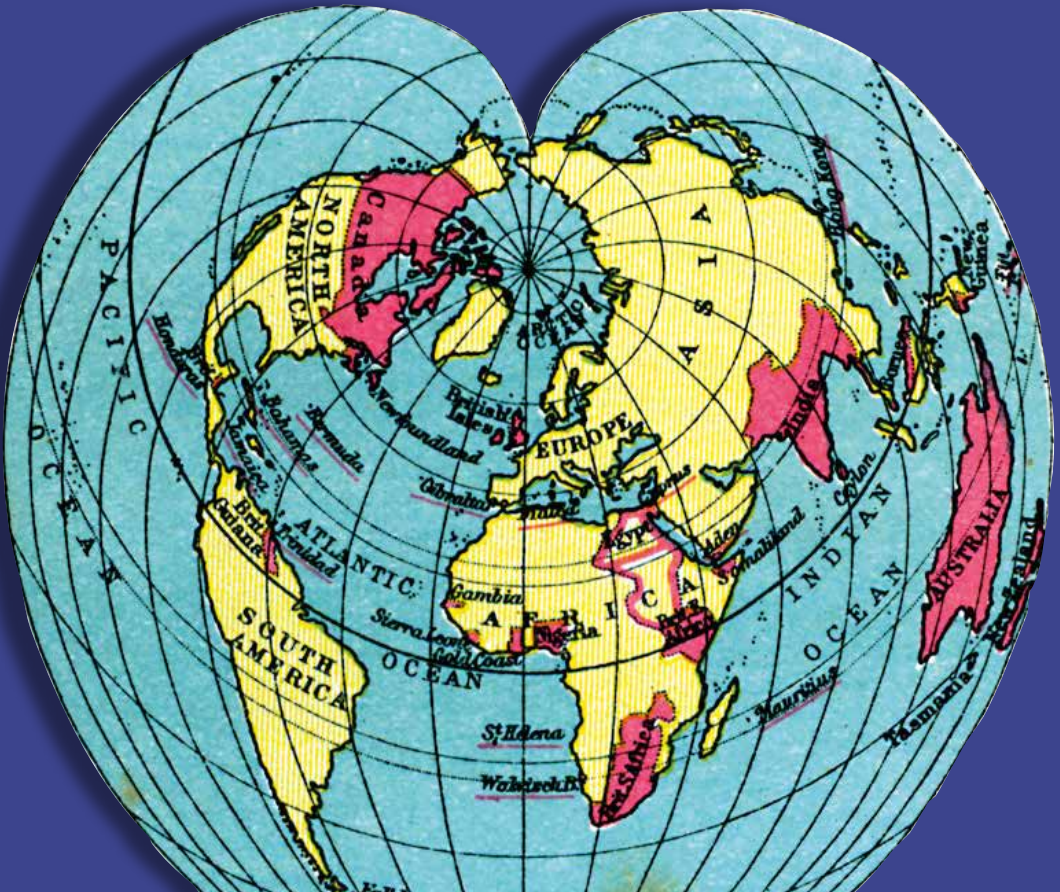
Stéphanie Prévost and Iain Sharpe
Liberal Politics and Empire:

Stéphanie Prévost

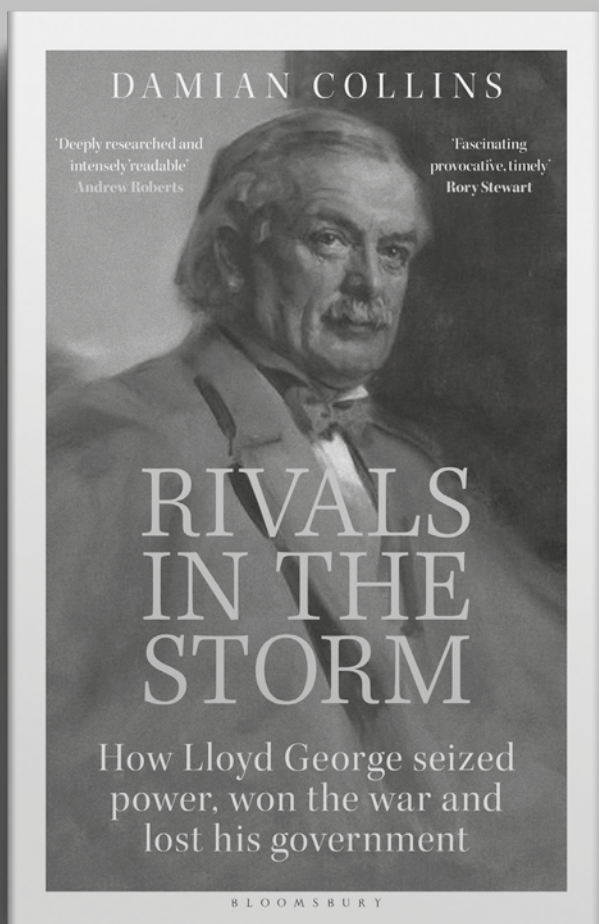
Liberal Internationalism and Imperialism: Odd bedfellows for ethical Liberals?

Jon Parry
**John Robert Seeley, Liberalism
and Empire**

Richard Toyne
Liberal Party, Empire and Commonwealth, 1900–1979:
A perspective through election manifestos



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THE BRITISH EMPIRE

A heart-shaped map of the world, centered on the North Pole, illustrating the extent of the British Empire. The map is divided into four quadrants by the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The British Empire's territories are shaded in light gray, including Canada, the British Isles, parts of Africa (Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Cape Colony), India, and Australia. The map is labeled with the names of the continents and oceans: NORTH AMERICA, SOUTH AMERICA, ATLANTIC OCEAN, INDIAN OCEAN, ASIA, AUSTRALIA, and ANTARCTIC OCEAN. Specific territories and islands are also labeled, such as British Isles, Canada, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cape Colony, India, and Australia. The map is framed by a heart-shaped border.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN liberalism and empire over time is a vexed and complex one – one that has provoked intense debates about how the relationship should be understood. Liberals can be pulled in opposite directions. Their belief in universal values of freedom and justice can lead to a sense that these values can be exported globally – if necessary, through empire. At the same time liberalism's commitment to peace and non-aggression often made Liberals critics and opponents of imperial expansion.

The study of the interaction between Liberal politics and empire has certainly not been without heated debate. As long ago as the 1950s, the work of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher challenged the prevalent idea that the 'free trade' policy of nineteenth-century Liberals was essentially pacific and anti-imperial. In their 1953 article 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', they argued that the expansion of global trade led first to informal control of new territories and, otherwise, where this was not possible, to formal annexation. Thus, they argued, free trade drove extension of empire. This led to counterarguments highlighting the opposition of free trade's nineteenth century champions, such as Cobden and Bright, to imperial expansion.¹

More recently Uday Singh Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire* (1999) challenged the myth that liberalism necessarily was anti-imperial in nature and practice. In a postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism, Mehta examined the work of key liberal thinkers on India, especially across the eighteenth to twentieth centuries.² Mehta reassessed the thought of John Stuart Mill, with reference to his lifelong position as colonial administrator at the East India

Company (1823–1858) at a time when Britain tightened her grip over India. Mill's disdain for Indian culture and belief that Britain's role was to inculcate Indian people with European values was contrasted with less triumphalist view of that earlier renegade liberal, Edmund Burke.³

Mehta's arguments have proved controversial, possibly because they appeared to portray Mill – who retains an enduring status as a role-model for many modern liberals – in a negative light. Several historians have insisted that *Liberalism and Empire* was rather ahistorical, lacking in nuance and failing to recognise the evolution of liberalism or the ambivalent views of eighteenth-century proto-liberals like Smith, Bentham or Kant towards imperial conquest and domination.⁴ It has led to Mill's ideas about empire being examined anew, given the attention he paid to a variety of imperial contexts (India, Ireland, Jamaica, and settler colonies including those in Australia and New Zealand) and 'the internal tensions in Mill's theoretical project' whereby the endorsement of racial supremacy inherent within his liberal imperialism coexisted with his defence of individual rights in domestic Britain.⁵

Duncan Bell has analysed these tensions against the backdrop of British visions of world order and how these impacted relations with British colonies (Dominions, India and Crown colonies) and the USA – and how those then shaped political models for empire.⁶ Another line of studies focuses on Liberal/Radical critics of empire, who contested imperialism or, more often, fought for fairer representation within the British empire (for example, the joint advocacy of Irish home rule and Indian autonomy), sometimes by activating contacts outside of the British empire.⁷

These are mainly academic controversies, but, in recent decades, empire and its legacies have increasingly become part of political debate. Given the importance of empire

The British Empire in 1920. (Adapted from 'The British Empire', *Asprey's Atlas of the World* (Asprey and Co., Ltd., 1920). Map courtesy FCIT; <https://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/5400/5488/5488.htm>.)

and imperial questions during the great era of British Liberalism in the nineteenth century, it is unsurprising that contemporary questions of Britain's imperial legacy will involve debate about the reputation of prominent Lib-

The relationship between liberalism and empire over time is a vexed and complex one – one that has provoked intense debates about how the relationship should be understood.

erals. We have seen this most recently in public discussion about the connections of Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone to slavery and the Gladstone family's apology for this.⁸ Perhaps less well known is that Cecil Rhodes, whose reputation has come under scrutiny through the Rhodes Must Fall campaign in Britain,⁹ was, perhaps surprisingly, a donor to both the Liberal Party and the Irish Parliamentary Party – arising from his support for colonial self-government within the empire.¹⁰

Since 2015, and perhaps more than ever following Brexit and Black Lives Matter in 2020, the British empire has been at the centre of an unprecedented culture war in Britain. This does often descend into a binary 'good thing versus bad thing', with, on the one hand, works exposing the continuing effect of imperial violence on today's Britain and the resurgence of neoliberal imperialism,¹¹ and, at the opposite end, others downplaying or even denying the violence and racism inherent in the imperial/colonial enterprise in order to uphold its civilisational value, or justify some form of 'Empire-lite' military intervention in the context of failed/failing states (such as Iraq in 2003).¹² These, in turn, have led to further works specifically addressing these arguments'.¹³

We have attempted to avoid making this special issue another skirmish in the imperial history wars, although it is touched on through the discussion of Sir John Seeley and

through William Wallace's review of Catherine Elkins's *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (2022). But its *raison d'être* is elsewhere. Drawing on the words of British public historian and writer David Olusoga in

'The Cotton Capital Project' – a research project examining both *The Guardian's* origins as a radical paper born out of Peterloo (1819) and its link to slavery – that

'two things can be true at the same time', the editors of this special issue call for a vigilant approach history so as to help us understand Liberal attitudes to empire and confront their contradictions – not explain them away or gloss over them.¹⁴ This critical reading forms the basis of the articles and reviews in this special issue.

The connection between Liberal politics and empire is a vast subject, with even the various themes and works mentioned above barely scratching the surface. So, we cannot hope in a single issue of this journal to cover all aspects of this theme. However, the contributions do each address an aspect of the Liberal Party's engagement with empire that we hope will be of interest to readers and leave them wanting to find out more.

Jonathan Parry tackles the political thought of the historian Sir John Seeley, author of *The Expansion of England* (1883), which popularised a liberal vision of empire and was famously an influence on the Liberal imperialist ideas of future prime minister Lord Rosebery. While Seeley has become embroiled in modern culture wars, including a campaign to rename Cambridge University's history library which bears his name, Professor Parry places his thinking in its nineteenth century context.

Using quantitative history and the digital history text mining tool across a mass corpus of Liberal Party speeches printed in the

local and national newspapers between 1880 and 1914, Luke Blaxill considers the impact of empire on Liberal electoral fortunes. He devotes particular attention to the recurring idea of ‘sane imperialism’ in that corpus and shows that it was most clearly brandished in the Liberals’ response to Joseph Chamberlain’s tariff reform campaign (1906 general election), which was portrayed as destabilising and dangerous. The Liberals thereby turned the table on the Unionists who, six years earlier, had inflicted on them a catastrophic electoral defeat in the 1900 general election, which took place against the background of the second imperial war in South Africa against the Dutch Boers.

Martin Pugh surveys the evolving attitudes of Liberals towards India from the early nineteenth century through to independence in 1947. This stretches from the patronising attitudes of Mills and Macaulay who assumed that Britain’s role was to train the Indian population in European values, then the loss of confidence in this reform process after the uprising of 1857, and finally the subsequent roles of such diverse Liberal figures as Edwin Montagu, Sir John Simon and Lord Reading in the road to Indian independence.

Stéphanie Prévost describes the interaction between liberalism, humanitarianism and imperialism by the post-Gladstonian era ‘ethical Liberals’, looking in particular at the

reactions to the Armenian massacres of the 1890s and the South African war of 1899–1902, and the tensions in both cases between the belief in non-intervention and the desire to play a constructive role in resolving these crises.

Richard Toye considers the history of Liberal attitudes towards empire and commonwealth through the prism of general election manifestos from 1900 to 1979. He argues that while Liberals were not indifferent to imperial and commonwealth affairs, such things were less important to them than they were to the Conservatives, perhaps explaining why the party was able to adapt to the end of empire and support greater European integration after the Second World War.¹⁵

These articles are supplemented by reviews of recent works on the interaction between Liberal politics and empire. William Wallace considers Caroline Elkins’ important new history of the British empire, *Legacy of Violence* (2022), which exposes the contradictions between the liberal rhetoric about England’s ‘civilising mission’ and the systemic violence that established and maintained imperial rule. Andy Cabot reviews Michael Taylor’s *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* (2021), a work on resistance to the abolition of slavery from the 1823 Demerara rebellion to the passing of the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, which

Further reading

Further reading on empire from recent editions of the *Journal of Liberal History*:

John Powell, ‘William Gladstone and the question of slavery, 1832–33’, 120 (Autumn 2023).

Peter Hain, ‘Stop the Tour!’, 118 (Spring 2023).

Brendon Jones, ‘Herbert Lewis and the South African war, 1899–1902’, 117 (Winter 2022–23).

Tom Axworthy and Lorna Marsden, ‘The Long-Lived Liberal Party of Canada’, 102 (Spring 2019).

Iain Sharpe, review of Alan Lester, Kate Boehme and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-century British Empire*, 115 (Summer 2022).

emphasises the ambivalent motives behind the abolition movement in that decade. Iain Sharpe critiques Christopher Taylor's *Empire of Neglect: The West Indies in the wake of British Liberalism* (2018), which discusses a lesser-known aspect of empire, the relative lack of interest held by British society and politicians in its Caribbean colonies during much of the nineteenth century.

We hope not only that readers will enjoy the articles and reviews in this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, but that it may lead to future contributions on this vast and fascinating subject. ■

Stéphanie Prévost is Senior Lecturer in 19th-century British history and culture at Université Paris Cité and a junior member of the Institut Universitaire de France. She has extensively published on British–Ottoman nineteenth-century relations (especially in the context of the Eastern Question) and is currently researching late-19th-early 20th century practices of refugeedom in Britain and the Empire.

Dr Iain Sharpe studied history at Leicester and London Universities, completing a doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party in the Edwardian era. He was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford for thirty years.

- 1 John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson 'The imperialism of free trade', *Economic History Review*, 6:1 (1953), pp. 1–15; Oliver MacDonagh, 'The Anti-Imperialism of Free Trade', 14:3, *The Economic History Review*, pp. 489–501. See also Louis, William Roger, Ronald Robinson, and John Gallagher (eds.), *Imperialism: The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New Viewpoints, 1976) and Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The official mind of imperialism* (Macmillan, 1961).
- 2 Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A study in nineteenth-century British Liberal thought* (The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 20. For a more radical attack of Liberalism, see Bhikhu Parekh, 'Decolonizing Liberalism', in Alexander Shtromas (ed.), *The End Of 'Isms': Reflections on the fate of ideological politics after Communism's collapse* (Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 85–103.
- 3 Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford University Press, 1994).
- 4 For example, the review article by Andrew Sartori, 'The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission', *The Journal of Modern History*, 78:3 (2006), pp. 623–42. See also: Sankar Muhtu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Donald Winch, 'Bentham on Colonies and Empire', *Utilitas*, 9:1 (1997), pp. 147–54; Barbara Arneil, 'Jeremy Bentham: Pauperism, Colonialism, and Imperialism', *American Political Science Review*, 115:4 (2021), pp. 1147–58.
- 5 As a complement to Zastoupil, see especially: Karuna Mantena, 'Mill and the Imperial Predicament', in Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (eds.), *J. S. Mill's Political Thought: A bicentennial reassessment* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 317; Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, pp. 150–9; essays by Georgios Varouxakis, David Theo Goldberg, J. Joseph Miller and H. S. Jones in Bart Schultz and Georgios Varouxakis (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Empire* (Lanham, MD, 2005); Mark Tunick, 'Tolerant imperialism: John Stuart Mill's defence of British rule in India', *The Review of Politics*, 68 (2006), pp. 586–611; Katherine Smits, 'John Stuart Mill on the Antipodes: Settler violence against indigenous peoples and the legitimacy of colonial rule', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 54:1 (2008), pp. 1–15.
- 6 Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the future of world order, 1860–1900* (Princeton University Press, 2007); Duncan Bell (ed.), *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and international relations in nineteenth-century political thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Reprint edn., Princeton University Press, 2016); Duncan Bell (ed.), *Empire, Race, and Global Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and utopian destiny of Anglo-America* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Duncan Bell, 'John Stuart Mill on Federation, Civilization and Empire', *History of Political Thought*, forthcoming 2024.
- 7 Alongside seminal, early works by Bernard Porter – *Critics of Empire: British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism in*

- Africa, 1815–1914* (Macmillan, 1968) – and R. J. Hind – *Henry Labouchère and the Empire, 1880–1905* (Athlone Press, 1972) – see also: Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre, *Cosmopolitan Nationalism in the Victorian Empire: Ireland, India and the politics of Alfred Webb* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Dinyar Patel, *Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism* (Harvard University Press and Harper Collins India, 2020) and accompanying website <https://dinyarpatel.com/naoroji/letter-box/> including correspondence on Liberalism and Empire; Vikram Visana, *Uncivil Liberalism: Labour, capital and commercial society in Dadabhai Naoroji's political thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- 8 See, for example, Jonathan Smith and Paul Lashmar, 'How William Gladstone defended his father's role in slavery', *The Guardian*, 19 Aug. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/19/william-gladstone-family-of-former-british-pm-to-apologise-for-links-to-slavery> (accessed 3 Mar. 2024).
- 9 For a statement of the movement: Roseanne Chantiluke, Brian Kwoba and Athinangamso (eds.), *Rhodes Must Fall: The struggle to decolonise the racist heart of Empire* (Zed Books, 2018).
- 10 Thomas Mohr, 'Irish Home Rule and Constitutional Reform in the British Empire, 1885–1914', *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, xxiv:2 (2019), <https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/3900#authors>.
- 11 Colin Mooers (ed.), *The New Imperialists: Ideologies of Empire* (Oneworld Publications, 2006); Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British did to India* (Penguin Books, 2018); Robert Gildea, *Empires of the Mind: The colonial past and the politics of the present* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Catherine Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A history of the British Empire* (Penguin, 2022).
- 12 In particular: Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (Vintage, 2003); Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the modern world* (Penguin, 2004); Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the rest* (Penguin, 2011); Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A moral reckoning* (William Collins, 2023).
- 13 For example: Dane Kennedy, *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch (eds), *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Robert Saunders, 'Brexit and Empire: "Global Britain" and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48:6 (2020), pp. 1140–74.
- 14 'David Olusoga on *The Guardian's* links to slavery: "That reality can't be negotiated with"', *The Guardian*, video, 28 Mar. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/video/2023/mar/28/david-olusoga-examines-the-guardians-links-to-slavery-that-reality-cant-be-negotiated-with>. See also James McDougall, 'The history of empire isn't about pride – or guilt', *The Guardian*, 3 Jan. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/03/history-empire-pride-guilt-truth-oxford-nigel-biggars>.
- 15 On Liberalism and decolonisation, see the special issue of *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 46: 5 (2018), edited by Harshan Kumarasingham, especially the introduction 'Liberal Ideals and the Politics of Decolonisation'; and Peter Hain's 'Stop the Tour!' on his experiences in the Young Liberals fighting apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s, *Journal of Liberal History*, 118 (2023).

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Liberal Internationalism and Imperialism: Odd bedfellows for ethical liberals?

‘THE MOVEMENT FOR the development of great empires has gone on very rapidly in recent times, but we have no assurance that the true stability of national life will be maintained in these great, gigantic federations of states. Moreover, most of the territory which has been acquired by the civilized nations within the last thirty years is held very slightly and upon a most precarious tenure. The dream of a single empire in the future, or of a stable equilibrium of a few empires, dividing among them the power of the world, and existing in amicable relations with one another, proceeding upon the line of national self-development purely, is to my mind less warranted than even the dream of Cobden [international peace through free trade worldwide].’¹

Such was Liberal theorist (1858–1940) J. A. Hobson’s assessment of the late nineteenth-century European course of imperial expansion (best known as ‘New Imperialism’) and world order, expounded in 1906. Written after the 1899–1902 Second Anglo-Boer War, which he denounced, this article, entitled ‘The Ethics of Internationalism’, clearly saw ‘New Imperialism’ and the liberal internationalist quest for world peace as incompatible. In so

doing, Hobson asked Liberals to (re)think the articulation of Liberalism, imperialism – here simply taken to mean ‘the principle or policy of empire’ – and internationalism as the party regained power following a landslide victory, but after ten years in opposition (1895–1906).

It is on those years in opposition that this article focuses. It explores the meaning of that triad – Liberalism, imperialism and internationalism – over that decade for a group of Gladstonian progressive Liberals who were later associated with the 1899–1902 anti-Boer-war movement, thereby extending the traditional scope of analysis for that group.² It considers the triad as foundational for their conception of a revamped Liberalism – one that would articulate liberal morality and politics with social principles and individual improvement – at a time of party setbacks and divisions over imperialism.³

These ethical progressive Liberals’ positions were deeply impacted by the divisions over imperialism that predated the period 1895–1906. In his 1878 article ‘England’s Mission’, Liberal opposition leader William Gladstone criticised the Conservative ‘tandem’ (Premier Benjamin Disraeli and Foreign Secretary the 3rd Marquess of Salisbury) for entering

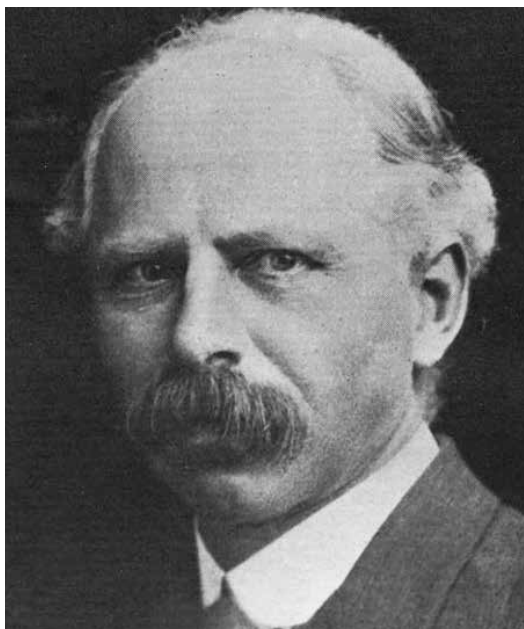
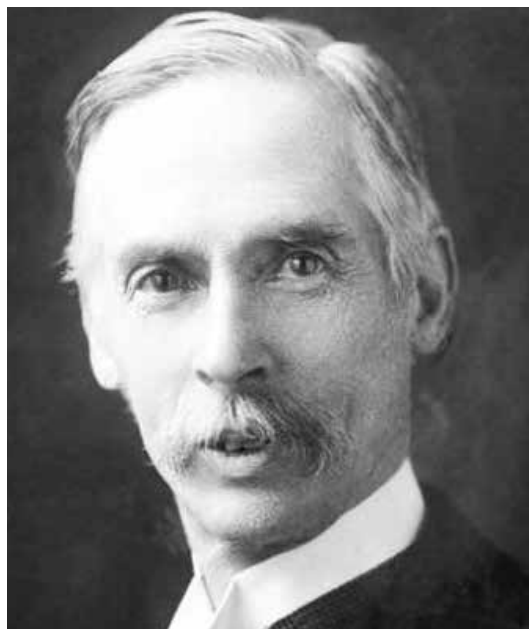
a defence deal with the Ottoman Empire that entrusted Britain with the administration of Cyprus, since, from a Liberal perspective, ‘the prospective multiplication of possessions overseas [was], to say the least, far from desirable’.⁴ When the Gladstone government reluctantly bombarded Alexandria and then authorised the British occupation of Egypt from 1882, the move – officially to restore order in the context of burgeoning Egyptian nationalism – alienated many Radical and Independent Liberals, who saw this as an unacceptable U-turn.⁵ With Gladstone’s home rule bills (1886, 1893), the most imperially minded Liberal Unionists agreed with the Conservative accusation that what Gladstone saw as ‘England’s mission’ meant imperial disintegration (and especially the risk of an eventually independent Ireland). As such, they welcomed the Conservative–Liberal Unionist alliance in the 1895 general election, which resulted in Joseph Chamberlain becoming Salisbury’s colonial secretary.⁶ Internal rifts reached a new high as the Liberal imperialist faction (Limps), loosely organised from 1888 under the Earl of Rosebery to defend national efficiency, the maintenance of empire and party consensus over empire, became stronger in the post-Gladstonian era to the point of nearly killing the party.⁷ Indeed, in 1899, Limps supported the Salisbury government’s decision to wage war on the Boers in the name of Liberal patriotism.⁸ Factionalism had been an issue for some time. Already, a few days ahead of the 1895 general election, Prime Minister Rosebery publicly warned ‘the children of Gladstonianism to [not] cross over the sea that protects a hitherto united Empire from dismemberment’, on the grounds that this contravened the ‘voice of the country’.⁹ To Rosebery, as always, the country was after ‘greater pride in the Empire’, i.e. ‘a larger patriotism’ – a belief that had led him, as Gladstone’s foreign secretary in 1892, to push for the annexation of Uganda against the premier’s will.¹⁰

Contrary to Rosebery’s portrayal, many Gladstonian ethical Liberals did not call for the dismemberment of the empire, although they did criticise new imperialism. As this article argues, they instead sought to see how British imperial policy could be articulated alongside their increasingly ethical and internationalist Liberalism and seized on humanitarian crises to rethink Britain’s relationship to the empire. While many excellent biographical essays on New Liberal intellectuals and internationalism exist, close attention to the applied ethics in international relations (versus theoretical ethics) of ethical Liberals is rather wanting.¹¹ Yet, practical actions here deserve attention, as this group saw ‘ethics [as] inextricably tied to spatial practices’ and worked in practical terms towards what they hoped would be a harmonious triad of Liberalism–imperialism–internationalism.¹² This article is an attempt to remedy this.¹³

This article thus foregrounds their pragmatic, experimental responses to events that would shape their understanding of a revived Liberalism and centres on some of these key contexts. The first case revolves around the Armenian massacres of the 1890s, in which 80,000–250,000 people died: it examines their suggestion that individual responsibility in humanitarianism and constructive imperialism were reconcilable.¹⁴ The second part takes the Second Boer War (1899–1902) as its main context to discuss the acceptability and limits of imperial intervention. Finally, internationalist endeavours are discussed under the banner of a nascent ‘imperial internationalism’.

Individual responsibility, humanitarianism and ‘constructive imperialism’

As shown by the 4,923 petitions sent to the Foreign Office between November 1894 and December 1896 to denounce Ottoman Sultan



New Liberal thinkers: J. A. Hobson (1858–1940) and L. T. Hobhouse (1864–1929)

Abdul Hamid II's cruelty and call Britain to act, mass violence against Ottoman Armenians was received as a great and sustained shock in Britain.¹⁵ Although long overlooked (due to the destruction of these petitions), the Armenian agitation was carefully crafted by Liberal publicists, clergy, and politicians close to Gladstone as an issue that was central to the party's identity.¹⁶ At a time when the party was becoming increasingly divided over imperial policy, this issue was construed by self-identified Gladstonian Liberals as an opportunity for party reunification, just as the defence of Bulgarian Christians had had a similar potential for a disunited Liberal Party in 1876–80 and had henceforth been perceived as the kernel of Liberal identity.¹⁷ In the first issue of *The Commonwealth*, a periodical launched in January 1896, High Church Canon Scott Holland, a staunch Gladstonian Liberal, exclaimed: 'Deeper than the dividings of party, supreme over all accidents of class is the Common-wealth – the Common Life, in the name of the community, for the common

good. (...) We shall claim for the cause of our common humanity, everything that is fairly and decently human'.¹⁸

The context was, however, very different from 1876, when a Conservative government (that of Disraeli) was in power, and the Liberals could build on the agitation as an opposition party.¹⁹ When news of the Sasun massacre reached Britain in late summer 1894, Gladstone had retired a few months before, officially due to age and health, but also because the cabinet had failed to endorse his opposition to increased naval estimates. At least in the name of party unity, it was hoped by the organ behind the agitation – the Anglo-Armenian Committee (AAC), an extra-parliamentary organ established by Liberal jurist James Bryce in 1879 under the aegis of Gladstone – that Rosebery would bury the hatchet and respond positively to the AAC's demand for British pressure on the Ottoman polity to stop the massacres. Rosebery's refusal to take action (other than commanding a European commission of investigation into the

massacres) spurred a devastating AAC campaign by its secretary, Gladstone's friend and High Anglican Canon MacColl that added to the difficulties faced by Rosebery's government before its downfall in the 'cordite vote' in June 1895 and the subsequent Liberal electoral defeat in July 1895.²⁰ But it also had the effect of asking Liberals what else beyond petitioning could be done outside of government action, by individual citizens within a political community, to relieve Armenians.²¹

Thanks to the steadfast support of charismatic religious leaders across denominations – all progressive Liberals favourable to Christian social work (including Gladstone's son Stephen, Anglican rector of Hawarden) – and the support of many Gladstonian MPs, the AAC successfully organised fundraising from May 1895 throughout Britain. The flame of 1876 was revived.²² Meanwhile, MacColl managed to convince fellow Liberal Armenophiles not to make the agitation a party matter. What he wanted was for Liberals to trust the new premier, the Conservative Salisbury, as MacColl thought that Salisbury represented Ottoman Armenians' best chance, because he agreed to distributing Armenian relief via Foreign Office diplomatic posts in the Ottoman Empire the minute he returned to office in July 1895.²³ MacColl did his utmost to ensure that Liberal demands were consistent with international treaties. Indeed, in the absence of a humanitarian military intervention collectively sanctioned by signatories of the 1878 Berlin Treaty (article 63), France, Britain, Russia, Prussia, Austria and Italy were collectively responsible for overseeing the implementation of reforms for Armenians' welfare (article 61). A unilateral move on the part of Britain to save Armenians could thus mean war, unless it was authorised by the other treaty signatories. In the context of a very divided Europe, relief collection and distribution seemed to MacColl to be the best option for aid to the Armenians without risking a European diplomatic crisis.

For many ethical Liberals, ad hoc relief was soon not enough, since it failed to bring durable protection for Ottoman Armenians. Humanitarianism 'concerned [itself] not merely with the direct alleviation of suffering and prevention of cruelty, but with the removal of fetters, the opening of opportunity to individual and national self-development, the utilisation of vastly increased material resources for the common benefit, the bringing in of the humblest to the banquet of civilisation'.²⁴ Shortly after their arrival at Constantinople in March 1896 to distribute Quaker relief, Biblical scholar and Liberal Quaker James Rendel Harris – a cousin of Gladstone's friend and confidant, Lord Rendel of Hatchlands – and his wife Helen decided to redirect part of the relief money to organise an emigration scheme for Armenians and offer them a new start somewhere safe. 'Imperial refuge', i.e. a safe spot in the British empire, was what they had in mind. This was to be an undercover operation, as it lay outside the prerogatives of the European powers under the 1878 Berlin Treaty and constituted a breach of Ottoman sovereignty. Any such scheme required the go-ahead of the foreign secretary, then Premier Salisbury, and of the British ambassador at Constantinople, Sir Philip Currie, Salisbury's former private secretary – all the more so as the first envisaged destination was Ottoman-British Cyprus. Despite Salisbury's public declarations that Britain could do nothing outside a European joint action, he came to regard emigration as a *fait accompli* that might as well be supported – just as, in 1898, he would consider the Ottoman and Chinese empires to be 'dying nations' whose territories would necessarily be encroached upon by 'civilised states', at the risk of war.

In June 1896, Rendel Harris was thus invited to liaise between the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office, to which Liberal social reformer Sarah Sheldon Amos had already submitted three emigration schemes for

settling adult, able-bodied Armenians wishing to emigrate to the north-west of Canada, Nyasaland and Cyprus, in a way that would help develop uncultivated lands and enhance the prosperity of these British imperial territories.²⁵ Following intercessions from her friend Canon Scott Holland and her brother Percy Bunting, the Liberal editor of the *Contemporary Review*, Salisbury rallied to the schemes, on condition that local colonial authorities approved. This line was readily endorsed by Chamberlain. The Canadian and Nyasaland schemes fell through, because of Canadian authorities' opposition and because of increasing tensions with the Boer Republics after the 1895 Jameson Raid.²⁶ The Cyprus scheme bloomed from mid-October 1896, after the Colonial Office and the British governor in Cyprus concluded that 'the establishment of a definite industrial home and refuge in a safe spot, where suitable and cheap premises [would be] offered, and where it [was] intended to receive and train to independence especially widows and orphans whose husbands and fathers [had] been massacred' would not disrupt the precarious harmony between local communities (Greek and Muslim).²⁷

As the third wave of massacres rolled through Anatolia from September 1896, positivist, biologist and urbanist Patrick Geddes contacted Percy Bunting to see how he could practically contribute to the prosperity of the Armenian industrial home in Cyprus.²⁸ After months of consultation, Geddes approached the Foreign Office and Colonial Office with a development scheme by which an agricultural colony would help revive Cyprus agriculture, thanks to the expertise of Armenian farmers and the implementation of appropriate infrastructure and land management strategies – which coincided with Chamberlain's plans for Cyprus (especially irrigation systems) from spring 1897.²⁹ The scheme was eventually to yield government revenue profits indirectly

through taxation, thereby making Cyprus profitable and offsetting the heavy tribute Britain owed the Ottoman empire under the 1878 Cyprus Anglo-Turkish Convention. But this first required investment money to start. As Geddes repeated over and over to interlocutors, 'it is time to rid [sic] of the common superstition that philanthropy is necessarily anti-business, and business anti-philanthropy' and, with the Foreign Office/Colonial Office's go-ahead, this was his chance to prove so.³⁰ He thus tried to get investors to support the Armenian labour colony on a grand scale. However, they rapidly considered the risks to be too high as Cyprus remained Ottoman territory (though it was administered by Britain), so that within a few years, the silk farm only survived thanks to a few friends in ethical Liberal and Social Christian circles.

Simultaneously, the agitation intensified and escaped MacColl's control, as many Liberals felt that Salisbury was not doing enough. Out of this final phase of the agitation sprang the Liberal Forwards, a faction meant to revive Gladstonian moralism. In the words of its initiator, Liberal MP as well as Gladstone's biographer (and former minister) George William Erskine Russell: 'if [the Liberal] cause [is] worth serving, then it [is] a case of humanity and freedom the whole world over and was the cause of their fellow creatures and fellow Christians wherever they might be found.'³¹ Gladstone never publicly supported the 'Liberal Forwards' endeavour, but covertly activated networks to shield it from the ferocious Roseberyite opposition.³²

'When is a war not a war?': the limits of imperial interventionism

In his *Democracy and Reaction* (1904), New Liberal thinker Leonard T. Hobhouse distinguished 'two deeply-contrasted pictures of Imperialism – the Imperialism of promise and the Imperialism of performance – the one

based on the constitution of the Empire as built up by Liberal statesmen, the other based on the policy of Empire as shaped by a generation of Imperialist statesmen'.³³ He made the Armenian massacres the very 'test case' that revealed how perverted New Imperialism ('the Imperialism of performance') was. Hobhouse argued that Conservatives and Limps brandished it as a civilising force and, yet, had been deaf to the Armenians' plea, although the 1878 Cyprus Convention hinged on the Sultan's commitment to introducing reforms for the protection of Christians in Eastern Ottoman provinces.

Hobhouse was by no means alone in his analysis. Interventions had been proposed by Gladstonian Liberals throughout 1896, such as sending the British fleet to protect the Armenians under the Cyprus Convention, or placing Ottoman Armenia under a British international mandate that the other European signatories of the Berlin Treaty could concede to Britain, in the name of her special responsibilities to Cyprus. As massacres intensified in September 1896, Gladstone came out of his retirement to offer Salisbury his public support, but soon recommended that Britain act alone in defence of Armenians, due to the European powers' failure to uphold their collective commitments and because of Britain's special duty under the convention.³⁴ Despite his full, but secret, commitment to Armenian emigrants, Salisbury brushed away those suggestions, famously declaring in November 1896 at Guildhall that 'no fleet in the world [could] get over the mountains of Taurus to protect the Armenians'.³⁵

To dissipate accusations (by France and Russia) that such proposals were pretexts for British expansionism, Manchester Congregationalist philanthropist Francis William Crossley suggested a radical move to Gladstone in the *Liberal Manchester Guardian*: giving up on Cyprus and turning it into a 'sanctuary' for Armenians, just as British abolitionists

had created the Freetown settlement for freed slaves out of colonial Sierra Leone in 1787.³⁶ While this didn't happen, 'the blunders of the past' remained very much present in the minds of ethical Liberals and socialist 'imperial sceptics'.³⁷ This was especially true after Rosebery resigned the Liberal leadership in December 1896 over Gladstone's position on the Armenian agitation and as imperial rivalries spiralled with France, Russia and Germany (in the Upper Nile Valley, on the north-eastern Indian border, in China and South Africa) over 1897–98.³⁸ Put simply, Britain's recent imperial acquisitions seemed to hamper her relations with other European powers and lead to war, rather than peace.

Britain's decision to wage war on the Dutch Boer Republics to secure the political representation of British settlers there (Uitlanders) in October 1899 and Lord Kitchener's war tactics in the third phase (March 1900–May 1902) – especially the scorched earth policy, the concentration camp policy and treatment of prisoners of war – placed British new imperialism on trial, more than ever before. With Rosebery asserting early on that Liberal patriotism commanded Liberals to support the British government's war policy, the party was further split. Many Liberal Armenophiles spoke out loud and clear in denunciation of that very policy (especially G. W. E. Russell, C. P. Scott of the *Manchester Guardian*, Rev. Clifford, Leonard T. Hobhouse, Radical Liberal Unionist MP Leonard Courtney, former editor of the *Daily Chronicle* Henry W. Massingham, etc.), although there were charismatic defectors (especially the progressive Liberal Methodist editor of the *Methodist Times*, Hugh Price Hughes, and Rev. James Guinness Rogers). While a 'humanitarian intervention' by imperial Britain to save Ottoman Armenians had been a dilemma for ethical Liberals who dreaded the use of force, even for humanitarian purposes (Quakers notably), the Boer War was simply intolerable and

un-Liberal. For Liberal Armenophiles, the Boer War proved another test case to refine their idea of Liberalism and imperialism (or rather empire), by making a third element – internationalism – indispensable to that revamped relationship.

As the extensive literature on the anti-war movement (best known as ‘the pro-Boer movement’) shows, the British Liberal, Radical Liberal and socialist ‘pro-Boers’ were ‘individuals with a strong individualistic bias’ and the movement’s homogeneity should not be overstated.³⁹ Nonetheless, beyond their divergences on domestic politics and the pace of reform, it may be fair to say that all agreed on denouncing the conflict as inhumane and barbaric, illegitimate and illegal, useless and costly, and detrimental to the image of Britain internationally, as well as within the empire. They advocated a change in methods and sought to put humanity and international justice first, including within international and trans-imperial relations. Though vocal, they remained a small faction within the party as most Liberals felt rather uneasy opposing the war originally.⁴⁰

Russell’s Transvaal Committee – the first ‘pro-Boer’ structure – was established by the Liberal Forwards in June 1899 before the conflict started. It pleaded for arbitration – an option that Russell inherited from Gladstone and that prospered amongst fellow Liberals who had urged Britain to accept arbitration (by the USA) in the ongoing boundary dispute with Venezuela and thus avert a war with the USA (which considered Britain’s claim a breach of the Monroe doctrine).⁴¹ This also coincided with the preoccupations of the peace conference that had just opened at the Hague in May 1899 on the invitation of Czar Nicholas II and which editor, former Gladstonian and Armenophile W. T. Stead, had promoted throughout Europe in 1898–99. One of the peace conference’s objectives was, indeed, to establish the first intergovernmental

Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at the Hague to facilitate the resolution of disputes. With Britain a participant at the conference and with her recently consenting to an arbitration treaty with the US, arbitration advocates hoped that the British government would accept the Boer Republics’ demand to submit the dispute to the PCA. But Britain refused, considering the peace conference to be first and foremost a great European powers’ meeting, to which the Boer Republics had not been invited, and that arbitration was ad hoc (not systematic).⁴² Above all, Chamberlain insisted that the Boer Republic of Transvaal had been technically under British suzerainty since 1881 and that international arbitration therefore did not apply (as the dispute was imperial and negotiations ongoing).⁴³

The Hague conference thus closed in July 1899 with the prospect of the Second Anglo-Boer war. Meanwhile, the Transvaal Committee failed to rally massive support at home. The decision by Transvaal President Paul Kruger to issue an ultimatum on 9 October asking for the withdrawal of British troops at the Republic’s border outpaced the British government – which was about to issue its own. War immediately ensued, as the ultimatum was deemed an ‘intolerable’ attack on Britain’s honour and prestige.⁴⁴ Chamberlain managed to rally public opinion, Conservatives and Limps behind him. The war declaration deprived the Transvaal Committee, very much a pre-war structure, of its *raison d’être*, especially as all those ‘advocating the cause of the Boers in South Africa, now at war with Her Majesty’ were suspected of sedition.⁴⁵

Over the next few months, the anti-war movement reorganised itself, but was going against the tide of public opinion. By Christmas Eve of 1899, the ‘Stop the War Committee and Stop it Now’ (STWC) was born under the aegis of Liberal Methodist preacher and novelist Silas K. Hocking to the cry that Britain (not the Boers) initiated the war and that it

should immediately be stopped.⁴⁶ Alongside Hocking, were Rev. Clifford (president), Mrs Amos, and Independent Labour Party Leader Keir Hardie; however, the most visible guiding light was public moralist Stead, just as he had been in the 1876 Bulgarian agitation movement. Just as then, Stead was incapable of half-measures – a fieriness that backfired.⁴⁷ The denunciation of the war as being ‘wrong’ and ‘ruinous’, as being a lie ‘to cover conspiracy’, as being ‘wholesale murder’ (including because ‘the youth of the Empire [was] wantonly slain’) unleashed scenes of violence against STWC meetings, during which their members were chased as ‘traitors’.⁴⁸ In the context of the 1900 general election, the virulence of the STWC rhetoric – and the very fact that the STWC included Boers as members – played into the hands of the Conservative–Unionist coalition, which was returned to power with a landslide majority in the 1900 general election.⁴⁹

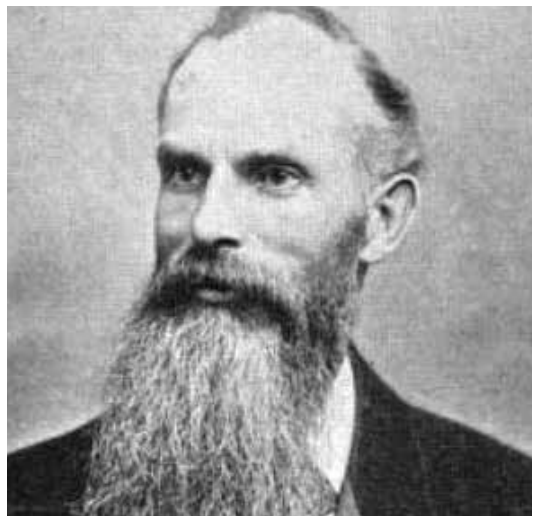
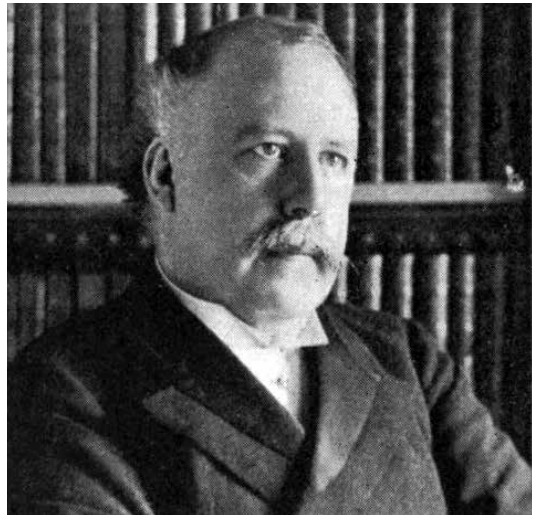
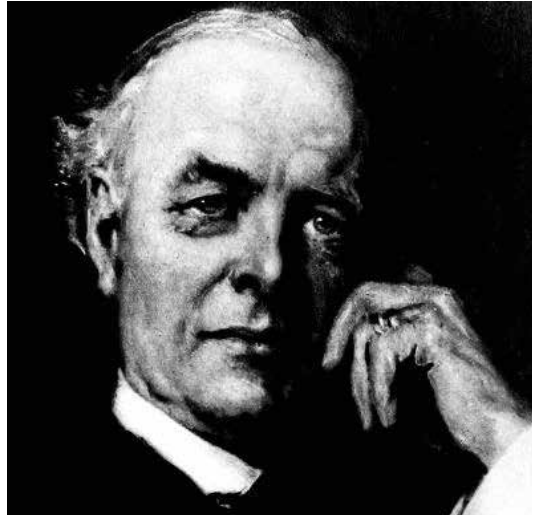
More moderate groups – such as the parliamentary League of Liberals against Aggression and Militarism (LLAM) or the related extraparliamentary South Africa Conciliation Committee (SACC, presided over by Leonard Courtney) – were formed in early 1900 to try and ‘retrieve the anti-war movement from the hand of extremists and doctrinaires’.⁵⁰ They failed to rally public support, despite extensive coverage in the *Manchester Guardian* (by Hobson and Hobhouse), as the London press was behind the government and the more moderate groups lacked a charismatic leader who might have turned the sorrow of British soldiers’ widows into a stop-the-war

From top:

Canon Malcolm MacColl (1831–1907) – Scottish cleric and campaigner

G. W. E Russell (1853–1919) – Liberal MP and minister

Silas Hocking (1850–1935) – Methodist preacher and Liberal candidate



argument. On 25 July 1900, Radical Liberal MP Sir Wilfrid Lawson – a member of the Transvaal Independence Committee in 1881, of the STWC, the LLAM and the SACC – proposed a vote of censure by ‘every friend of humanity, peace, and justice’ against Chamberlain, whom he blamed for the ‘degradation, demoralization, and probably disaster, on this country’.⁵¹ Though supported by all Liberals who were opposed to the war – including James Bryce, who recurrently argued that Britain violated international law in pursuing war on behalf of Uitlanders – it was not backed by the Liberal Party leader, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who abstained to try and maintain some equilibrium between Limps and Pro-Boers and ‘sought refuge in equivocation’.⁵² The SACC continued trying to ‘re-establish goodwill between the British and Dutch races in South Africa, by a full recognition of the just claims of both, and to urge a pacific settlement upon these principles’ – for instance by having John Molteno (the first premier of the Cape Colony) and John Merriman, opponents of Rhodes and advocates of responsible government, delineate their understanding of the war and denounce annexation.⁵³

This was to no avail until Emily Hobhouse, Leonard’s sister, herself arrested, imprisoned and deported on her way to distribute relief to South African women and children, exposed how the British army violated international *jus in bello* principles by starving Boer civilians (notably women and children) in concentration camps. Campbell-Bannerman then exclaimed during a dinner to Liberal leaders on 14 June 1901: ‘When is a war not a war? When it is carried out by methods of barbarism in South Africa’.⁵⁴ From then on, Campbell-Bannerman joined pro-Boers in contending that the continuance of war went against British interests and ‘a solid and stable settlement in South Africa’. Such a change of attitudes made Campbell-Bannerman’s followers uneasy, as the speech could appear

an attack on soldiers, rather than on the government and the military command and as this symbolically meant giving the pro-Boers the upper hand in the party, at the risk of fracturing the party once and for all. For a few months, Rosebery did play up the division, possibly in the hope of reclaiming the Liberal leadership for himself and the Limps, or even of in the hope of joining a coalition government should a new one be formed, following Salisbury’s impending retirement.⁵⁵ In the midst of chaos, it took the astute party sense of Herbert Gladstone, William’s fourth son, a firm supporter of Campbell-Bannerman and the Liberal chief whip since 1899, to try and keep the party united by preventing a Limp breakaway. Seeing a very timid overture in Rosebery’s ‘National Policy’ speech at Chesterfield in December 1901, Herbert Gladstone formulated the following in an attempt to find an acceptable rallying cry for most Liberals: ‘surely [they] are all bound by every consideration of patriotism and duty to work for the one end of the present, urgent and overwhelming importance – a right settlement while continuing every vigorous military action till the war ends’.⁵⁶

The ‘imperialism of promise’ ideal: towards harmony through conciliation and international cooperation?

What mattered then for ethical Liberals, in Britain and elsewhere, beyond party business was that Campbell-Bannerman was now endorsing LLAM and SACC principles, including promoting self-government for the colonies (an option that they preferred to having the annexed Boer Republics becoming British Crown Colonies).⁵⁷ Many read the Boer War from an evolutionist perspective: they firmly believed that ‘New Imperialism’ was becoming moribund and that it was high time to construct ‘new internationalism’ to build

peace. It required perseverance and time to achieve lasting effects: despite the promise of self-government for South Africa in the 1902 Treaty of Vereeniging, it was not until the Liberals returned to power in 1906 that implementation was seriously considered.

To Radical Liberal publicist and pacifist George H. Perris, the Permanent Court of Arbitration was the ‘first decisive step toward a human confederation which will be the formal expression of that common interest’; but institutional internationalism was still a long way ahead, with the PCA still waiting on its first case and failing to check Russian expansionism in China, for instance.⁵⁸ Ethical Liberals were deeply convinced that the Concert of Europe, which had failed to halt the Armenian massacres and ensuing conflicts, was moribund and that it needed to be replaced with a structure that involved civil society more – or more precisely, international civil society – as a check on governments. What structure exactly that might be was not yet determined; then only loose expressions like a ‘European Union’ or ‘the United States of Europe’ gave contours to this future structuralist project. For the time being, these Liberals

sought to invent new ways to mobilise citizens and parliamentary representatives, for they would be essential in popularising international arbitration and more constructive internationalism with national governments.

A first endeavour had taken place from late 1896, when Liberal Armenophiles decided to target public opinions in Europe with a series of translated pamphlets that they distributed in Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland (and probably beyond) in the hope that the public would in turn appeal to their governments and that if the Concert of Europe did not move, new structures might

be born.⁵⁹ International conferences for the relief of Ottoman Armenians also took place in Britain from 1897 with similar long-term hopes, and standardised petitions for peace, as Greece was waging war on the Ottoman empire to reclaim Ottoman Crete.⁶⁰ Though the Boer War seemed to call a halt to such transnational endeavours, individual contacts were maintained and associations pursued. For instance, Patrick Geddes’s intensive international consulting prior to his Cyprus experience allowed him to found the International Assembly on the margins of the 1900 Paris Exposition universelle, with James Bryce as vice-president and Léon Bourgeois, the French Radical Liberal father of solidarisme and one of France’s representatives at the Hague peace conference, as president. It aimed at bringing together social scientists in the hope of international cooperation – in 1900, there existed three branches (British, French and American) – and of diffusing

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international cooperation through education.⁶¹ Just like Leonard Courtney, Geddes thought that a ‘change in paradigms’ was needed and that education could do that, so that ‘honour’ was not only ‘a value to be held in war’, but also to be held in peace.⁶²

The Armenian agitation, the Hague Peace Conference and the Paris Exposition universelle were contexts that saw increasing transnational connections between liberal radicals in Britain, France, Germany (and to a lesser extent the United States), beyond the traditional forums offered by international journals. Another solid mooring in France was

Baron D'Estournelles de Constant, a former French ambassador to London (1890–1895), an Armenophile, and an advocate of international arbitration who represented France at the Hague peace conference. To him, French–English confrontation at Fachoda (1898) was proof enough that only international justice would end the increasing costs of armed peace and the international arbitration of war. Following the Boer War, he mobilised contacts in France to create the French parliamentary arbitration committee (1903) and turned towards international contacts (especially Bryce and Campbell-Bannerman) in Britain to establish a British branch, just as there was talk of a French–English arbitration treaty. Although the endeavour was mocked by Conservatives – who still believed that nothing could prevent war when national honour was at stake – French members were received in Britain and vice versa in late 1903–early 1904, just before the *Entente cordiale franco-anglaise* was signed (April 1904). D'Estournelles de Constant thought that all occasions to mobilise transnationally – such as for Macedonia and Armenia in 1903 and 1904 – should strengthen a European public opinion for world peace and that international arbitration should also apply to empire.⁶³

Though British Liberal contact with D'Estournelles de Constant was less active in 1905, when the latter deployed his international Conciliation internationale committee (under the aegis of American philanthropist and peace advocate Andrew Carnegie), as they were trying hard to restore the Liberal Party's unity for an upcoming general election, they shared his understanding. They thus participated as much as time allowed them – for example, Campbell-Bannerman gave a speech at the 1906 Interparliamentary Union in London, a few months after he had become premier. But the peace-all-round 'imperialism of promise' was still very much a chimera, in which the place of the United States and of

so-called 'racial unity' (vis-à-vis Europe) was a heated topic – for instance for Stead.⁶⁴

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The years in opposition were formative for ethical Gladstonian Liberals who sought to reinvent the Liberal mantra after the death of an iconic leader. The triad of Liberalism–imperialism (or rather empire)–internationalism was central to that process, with practical, experimental schemes that revealed how much humanitarianism – and the cause of humanity – was key to their 'new Liberalism' and their understanding of cosmopolitan nationalism. Retrospectively, however, their internationalist/ethical 'new Liberalism' differed little from the Liberalism of social reform that came to characterise Liberal politics after 1906 and could be regarded as the story of a relative failure, in that it only remained strong on the backbench and in transnational venues after that date. This would only change with the advent of the First World War, when most of these ethical Liberals joined internationalist organisations – such as the Bryce Group – that would devise a new international organisation to maintain a lasting peace and were thus at the origins of the League of Nations (established in 1919). But for the time being, this seemed far off.

Indeed, ahead of the 1906 general election and of the 1903 Lib–Lab pact, the party reunification process, under the aegis of Campbell-Bannerman and of Chief Whip Herbert Gladstone, had to prune out centrifugal options and single out relatively consensual issues. Internationalism and all-round conciliation in the empire was not a high priority on that agenda and seemed very impractical to Limps for instance. By contrast, the 1906 Liberal electoral strategy centred on a consensual indicting of the Conservative–Unionist imperialism as being antagonistic to Britons' prosperity and sense of humanity, and on a denunciation of their favouring Chinese

indentured servants to work in South African gold mines rather than Uitlanders. While the 1906 Liberal campaign made the empire a prominent issue, it was primarily articulated through a domestic patriotism and the then rather vague promises of social reform, with a hope to capture the Labour vote.

As such – and in spite of the Radicals’ citing the contribution of Indian soldiers to Britain’s imperium as an argument for self-government – the 1906 consensus meant that any radical change in the hierarchy between the metropolis and colonies seemed far in the future, apart from the decision to favour free trade (rather than Chamberlain’s imperial preference scheme) and the insistence on humane treatment of the colonised. After all, many (ethical) Liberals, including New Liberal thinkers such as Hobson and Hobhouse, still believed in the moral mission of Britain in the empire, including her ‘civilising mission’ alongside the process of national self-government. Thus, they did not really dispute Bryce’s idea of sovereignty as a long-won process that would first benefit the Dominions, and then the Crown Colonies when they ‘came of age’.⁶⁵ Put differently, and congruent with the dominant stance amongst American and European liberal internationalists at that time, institutional/federal internationalism was still envisaged by British ethical liberals as the turf of the ‘Great Powers’, whereby colonies were not yet legitimately able to sit as equals or negotiate their relationship to ‘the mother country’ (mainland Britain). At least for the time being, their internationalist/ethical Liberalism thus remained largely subsumable under post-1906 New Liberalism. ■

Stéphanie Prévost is Senior Lecturer in 19th-century British history and culture at Université Paris Cité and a junior member of the Institut Universitaire de France. She has extensively published on British–Ottoman nineteenth-century relations (especially in the context of the Eastern Question) and is currently researching late-19th-early 20th century practices of refugeedom in Britain

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The Liberals and India



FOR EARLY-NINETEENTH CENTURY Liberals, India presented both a challenge and an opportunity. A fundamentally optimistic creed, Liberalism started from the assumption that, as human nature was essentially the same everywhere, people's lives could be transformed by the application of enlightened ideas and strategies. By the 1830s, England was alive with campaigns for social and political improvement – symptomatic of the belief in progress that was to dominate the Victorian era. However, at home the obstacles to reform were formidably entrenched. By contrast, India offered a huge and tempting laboratory in which

Souvenir of British Empire Exhibition, 1924

the ideas of reformers might be tested and evaluated through the application of a skilled and paternalistic British elite. This confidence was famously reflected in *The History of British India* (1818) by James Mill (1773–1836) who served as an examiner of correspondence for the East India Company from 1819 and as head examiner until 1836.¹ He was especially critical of Hindu society for its backwardness and corruption. The influence of critics increased both through the company and in parliament through such key figures as Charles Grant, a

puritanical evangelical, who served as company director, chairman and as an MP. The result was that, in 1813 and 1833, when the company's charter had to be renewed by parliament, some of its rights were withdrawn and it was also obliged to open India up to missionary work; Liberals also regarded the company as symptomatic of the privilege and monopoly of an earlier era that operated against the public interest, and they therefore used parliament to expose India to free trade.

These trends remind us that their belief in progress made Liberals in a sense illiberal. In the short-to-medium term, they were inclined to be highly critical of what they saw as the stagnation and superstition of Indian society that must be freed from the influence of despots, landlords and priests. T. B. Macaulay expressed this scorn for Oriental culture when he commented, in 1835, that the entire literature of India was 'not worth a single shelf of a good European library'.² Also, although nineteenth-century Liberals strongly sympathised with the claims of Greeks and Italians to national self-determination, they believed that Indians' claim to freedom and independence lay far into the future, as they were presently dominated by what James Mill disparaged as 'the silly, sentimental admiration of oriental despotism'.³ In short, Indians would need British guidance for a long time to come. As Macaulay put it on the renewal of the East India Company charter in 1833: 'by good government we may educate our subjects into a capacity for better government ... [and] they may in some future age demand European institutions'.⁴ Increasingly, then, Liberals parted company with the Orientalists who, in the later eighteenth century, had learned Indian languages, taken Indian wives and adopted local food, clothing and other customs. They assumed that the English were in India for the long term but expected that the eventual outcome of English rule would be the development of an educated middle

class capable of releasing Indian talent and enterprise.

Consequently, the early agenda of Liberalism lay in promoting free trade, introducing the English language, land reform and law reform, allowing missionary activity and separating the state from native religious practice, rather than in political innovation. The major exception to this was a free press. Whereas Conservatives and Orientalists feared that a free press would undermine British rule, Liberals argued that, by discrediting Indian superstition, it would be an aid to improved government. 'If India could only be preserved as a part of the British Empire by keeping its inhabitants in a state of ignorance,' wrote Sir Thomas Metcalfe, 'our dominion would be a curse ... and ought to cease.'⁵ In any case, one could not deny to British people living in India the rights they enjoyed in Britain. Herein lay the liberal flaw in the Raj, for India was never an unqualified autocracy; as Macaulay once observed, it was the only country in the world where the government was autocratic, but the press was free.⁶

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In this period, the most comprehensive attempt to apply the principles of Liberalism in India came under Lord William Bentinck whose governor-generalship (1828–35) is usually seen as a watershed in the evolution of modern India.⁷ Yet there was an element of accident in his appointment. Despite previous experience as governor of Madras, Bentinck's appointment was blocked by Tory premiers Liverpool and Wellington who saw him as too high-minded, hostile to the East India Company, and influenced by utilitarianism and evangelicalism. However, they eventually ran out of willing candidates, as India was widely regarded as too unhealthy and too remote a place for an aspiring statesman.

By contrast with the usual governors-general who agreed to serve with a view to gaining

a new title, extending British territory, fattening the Company's profits, or even making money for themselves, Bentinck espoused the ideals of the new century. His statue in Calcutta claimed, in Macaulay's words, that he 'infused into Oriental despotism the spirit of British freedom ... [and] gave liberty to the expression of public opinion'. But as he had previously been recalled from Madras after a mutiny there, Bentinck felt obliged to be cautious; nevertheless, he undertook a wide range of innovations. He declined to acquire new territory and imposed economies on the army which led some officers to refuse to attend dinners with him. He ended the government's role in religious ceremonies and the collection of a pilgrim tax, and famously abolished several Hindu practices including suttee and thuggee. Other humanitarian reforms included the abolition of slavery and flogging in the army. The young men trained in utilitarian thinking were allowed a free hand to favour the ryots (cultivators) rather than the zamindars and taluqdars (landlords and tax collectors) in the collection of land revenue. Bentinck also began the construction of the Ganges Canal, and he increased the number of Indians employed in the administration, a small step towards the principle adopted in the 1833 Government of India Act that all positions should be open to Indians. Finally, he started spending the 100,000 rupees on education which had been available to governments since 1813 but was unused. In 1829, he determined that English would be the medium of public business, effectively displacing Persian, with the broader object of promoting European science and literature, the assumption being that rational thought could be conveyed only through this means.⁸

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After Bentinck's departure, the pace of liberal reform was checked partly by the Afghan War in 1838–39 and by a return to territorial

expansion. This neglect of the domestic situation was not decisively broken until a second phase, marked by the appointment of James Ramsay, Marquess of Dalhousie (1848–56), who, alongside Bentinck, is widely credited with laying the foundations of modern India.⁹ Only 35 years old, Dalhousie was one of the few leading statesmen to be sent to India. Like Gladstone, he was a Peelite who migrated to the Liberal Party via free trade. Industrious and religious, Dalhousie represented the more extreme end of Victorian Liberalism, being arrogant, anti-Oriental and impatient for improvement. In this, however, he reflected the trends in English society. For some years evangelicals had been gaining influence amid a wave of religious activism.¹⁰ Convinced of the depravity of mankind, evangelicals felt an obligation to put their moral beliefs into practice rather than relapse into complacency as they felt their eighteenth-century predecessors had done. Many of the younger men, trained at Haileybury College before coming out as district officers, criticised their elders for being too lax about Indian religion and too ready to compromise with the corruption that held the country back.

On the economic front Dalhousie completed the 800 miles of the Ganges Canal, introduced a telegraph service, unified the postal services and accelerated railway building so that, by 1858, India had 400 miles of railways. He also reflected the bias of the utilitarians against the middlemen in agriculture who were thought to be unproductive and took too much from the peasant farmers. If the state deprived them of their role, they believed, the effect would be to release more productive elements in society.

Above all Dalhousie rejected the Orientalist view of the Indian princes who had traditionally been regarded as a means of mitigating the alien quality of British rule; many of the 600 princes enjoyed alliances with Britain and, at such centres as Delhi, Hyderabad

and Lucknow, they were encouraged to cultivate the culture of the Mughal empire. Yet, to reformers like Dalhousie, the princes merely sustained Indian corruption and obstructed British reform. He identified a series of excuses and motives – misgovernment, strategic advantage, the adoption of heirs, extra land revenue – to justify the annexation of Mysore, Sindh, Punjab, Berar, Lower Burma, Oudh, Satara, Jhansi, Nagpur and Gwalior, in the process increasing British territory by a third.¹¹

In this way Dalhousie became, arguably, more responsible for provoking the revolt of 1857, known to the British as ‘the Indian Mutiny’, than any other individual. His most shocking takeover was Oudh (Lucknow), a large state in the Ganges valley, which displaced thousands of princely troops and retainers who relied on the Nawab for their livelihood. He also imposed a new revenue settlement at the expense of the local taluqdars; however, the revenue was set too high and was collected so quickly and systematically that it resulted in a social rebellion encompassing most levels of society.

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The revolt of 1857 provoked a reaction that slowed the pace of reform, reduced the role of missionaries, conciliated the princes and deepened the racial gulf. Contrary to earlier liberal assumptions, it now seemed that Indians were not really like Englishmen and that the Raj depended on maintaining an idea of the English as a super-race.¹² Yet Liberals still recognised that the Raj needed allies in Indian society who might gradually be incorporated into an official role. To this end they increasingly focused on the educated Indian middle class now emerging from the universities and schools created by British rule.

However, the revolt 1857 was by no means the only reason for the check to Liberal reform in India in the second half of the century. Indeed, during this era Liberalism

suffered what was in effect a crisis at several levels. Despite extensions of vote in 1867 and 1885, Liberals lost some of their earlier confidence in reform, recognising that the mass electorate was by no means the well-informed, thinking body of citizens they had hoped for; hence the resistance of some leading Liberals to extending the vote to women.¹³ In any case, after the Irish home rule split of 1886, Liberals were largely out of office for twenty years which inevitably limited their capacity to reform India.

Moreover, the earlier Liberal view was confidently challenged by Lord Salisbury, who argued that India demonstrated that autocratic government was really superior to a parliamentary system in which effective administration was hindered by the paraphernalia of debates, elections, political parties and campaigns. Conservatives like Salisbury felt especially suspicious of western-educated Indians who, they believed, posed a threat to the Raj; in the absence of suitable employment, they often became lawyers and journalists and thus articulate critics of British rule. Conservatives favoured the maintenance of racial separation and reliance on the traditional elements in society, hence the award of titles to the princes and the elevation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1876. In the process, India became a focus for a growing party-political divide; opponents of reform gathered in the increasingly anti-Liberal House of Lords, and conflicts between viceroys and secretaries of state became almost routine. For example, the Liberal viceroy, Lord Northbrook (1872–76), clashed with Salisbury when the Conservatives returned to office in 1874 and resigned. Similarly, the Conservative viceroy, Lord Lytton, resigned as soon as Gladstone’s victory in the 1880 general election was known.

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If these trends failed to stop liberalism altogether, they made it more controversial and

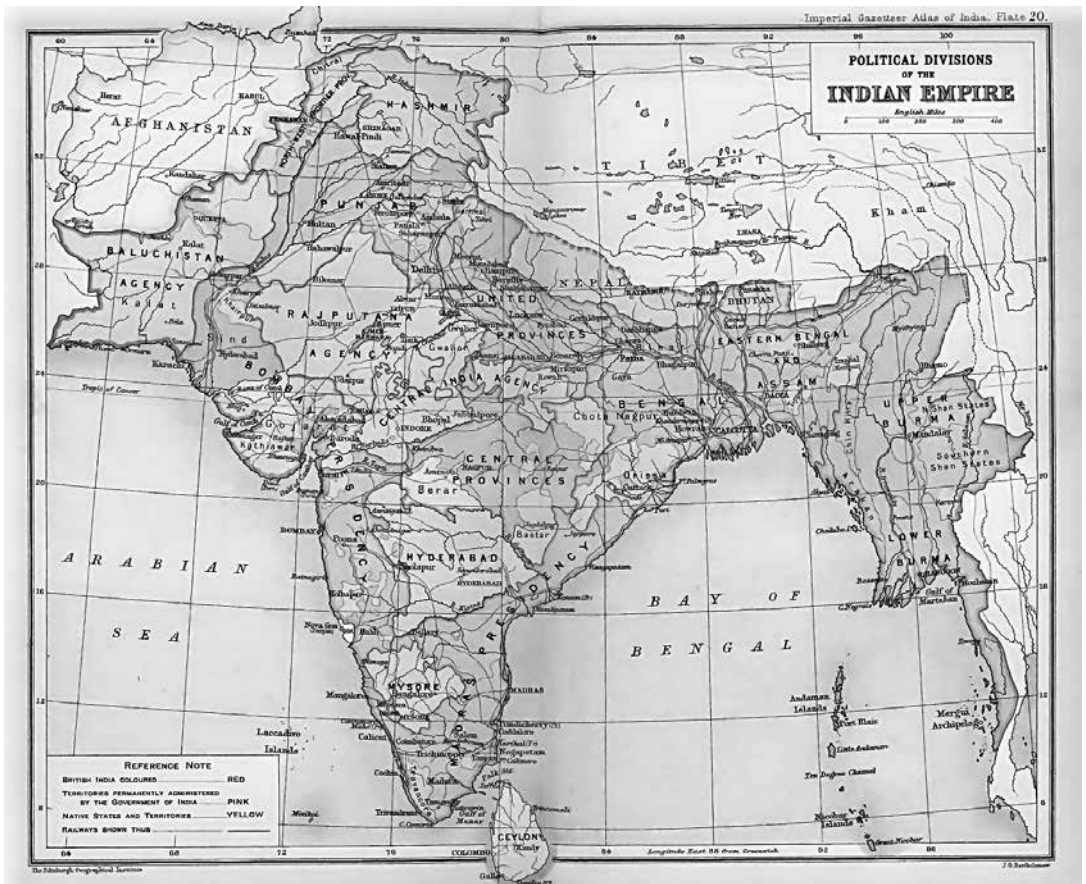
cautious in the late-Victorian era. Drawing the lesson from 1857 that India could not be held for ever, many Liberals judged it necessary for Britain to win the confidence of the educated class with a view to their participation in the administration. 'The existing connection between two such distant countries as England and India cannot, in the nature of things, be permanent', argued Charles Trevelyan, the governor of Madras. 'No effort of policy can prevent the natives from ultimately regaining their independence. But there are two ways of arriving at this point. One of these is through the medium of revolution, the other through that of reform.'¹⁴ Some Indians themselves recognised that a model for this relationship now existed in the rise of Irish nationalism after 1874, which took the dual form of a respectable parliamentary party on the one hand and a popular grassroots movement on the other. The formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, with its office in London and its support from several British MPs, seemed to point the way forward.

Some Liberals went further in fostering links between nationalists and the National Liberal Federation whose secretary, Francis Schnadhorst, was alive to the dangers of driving them into extremism and sedition. Henry Fawcett, who served as Gladstone's postmaster general, promoted the idea of direct Indian representation in parliament, and, in 1885, ten Liberal candidates, including John Bright, won endorsement from nationalist organisations in India; Lalmohar Ghosh was the first Indian to stand as a Liberal candidate – at Deptford in 1885.

One of the founders of Congress, Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), stood unsuccessfully at Holborn in 1886 but won by five votes as a Liberal in Central Finsbury in 1892.¹⁵ An articulate anti-imperialist, Naoroji aired Indian grievances in the Commons and developed the idea of a drain of wealth from India, arguing that Britain extracted annually £33 million

(a quarter of tax revenues). This he blamed for causing Indian poverty, contradicting the official version and challenging Liberal optimism.¹⁶ Naoroji argued that the drain was not a problem in the princely states as opposed to British territory; he therefore campaigned to reduce it by curtailing the role of the British civil servants and opening the Indian Civil Service to Indians by holding simultaneous examinations in the two countries. However, he failed to persuade the Liberal government to adopt simultaneous examinations and gradually became disillusioned with Gladstone and the party generally. Out of parliament, after 1895, he became more radical in his demands for self-government.

Victorian Liberals also enjoyed sympathetic links with Indian Muslims. Bentinck's social reforms had largely affected Hindu practices not Muslim; indeed, the Mughals had themselves attempted to abolish suttee. Moreover, since the eighteenth century, Anglo-Indians had recognised the extensive common ground between Islam and Christianity. Some Nonconformists fully endorsed the Islamic view that alien ideas such as the Holy Trinity had been imported into Christianity; they were initially known as Anti-Trinitarians, and as Unitarians by the nineteenth century. Many Nonconformists also appreciated the prophet, Mohammed, for his austere and disciplined lifestyle, especially those who had been alienated by the privilege and conservatism of the Anglican Church.¹⁷ By the late-Victorian period, the 5,000 Muslims living in England included around 1,000 converts including some well-connected Nonconformists such as Henry Stanley (1827–1905), diplomatist and Orientalist, who, as a Liberal peer (Baron Stanley of Alderley), took up Indian grievances in the House of Lords.¹⁸ In 1860, Stanley travelled to Mecca; he closed public houses on his Cheshire estates; and, when restoring churches, insisted on using the geometric designs as approved by Islamic



tradition. Stanley was buried at Alderley according to Islamic rites by an imam from the Turkish embassy.

However, despite his eminence Stanley was seen as too eccentric to be influential in Liberal circles. Much more central a figure was George Robinson, Marquess of Ripon (1827–1909), whose viceroyalty marked the start of a third phase of Liberal reform. Technically a Whig, Ripon was more of a Radical Liberal. Influenced by the 1848 revolutions in Europe he advocated complete democracy, became a Christian Socialist, supported Irish home rule, and was an ally of Gladstone.¹⁹ On becoming viceroy in 1880, Ripon enjoyed the advantage of his earlier experience as secretary of state

Political subdivisions of the British Raj in 1909 (Edinburgh Geographical Institute)

for India in 1866. Disliking imperialism in the sense of territorial expansion, he was conciliatory towards nationalists and accepted Indian self-rule as the ultimate objective.

Ripon's appointment coincided with the disastrous second British invasion of Afghanistan. Like many Liberals, he argued that, as Afghanistan could not be controlled effectively simply by installing an amir in Kabul, it was best left to act as a natural obstacle to any future Russian advances. Ripon consolidated Gladstone's policy both by abandoning the forward movement in Afghanistan and by avoiding a new war in Upper Burma in the face of opposition from the India Office and

his own council. He also persuaded Gladstone to pay £1/2 million towards the cost of Indian troops used in the occupation of Egypt in 1882 – an important recognition that this was primarily a British interest.

In 1882, against the advice of his officials, Ripon also revoked a reactionary measure of Lytton's, the Vernacular Press Act, which had banned the publication of anything deemed likely to cause disaffection and empowered district officers to see proofs and to confiscate printing machinery and copies – but only applied to the Indian press. However, more positive steps proved difficult. His proposal to include some Indians in the viceroy's legislative council was blocked at home. Assuming that local government would be less alarming, he proposed that the provinces elect a majority of members to local boards dealing with health, sanitation, education and public works. But Indians were not very interested, and the provincial authorities proved reluctant to implement his ideas. He also advocated, with Gladstone's support, giving the provinces a fixed proportion of the land revenues as a step towards local self-government, but the Council of India objected, and the provinces were slow to implement the suggestion. Ripon's most controversial idea, embodied in the Ilbert Bill, involved allowing Indian magistrates and district judges jurisdiction over Europeans. This, however, provoked enormous anger in the non-official British community, especially among the tea and indigo planters, and eventually Ripon compromised by allowing Europeans to be tried by jury.²⁰

As a result of these controversies, some contemporaries saw Ripon's viceroyalty as a disappointment, even a failure. But it was a very positive failure. Indians had noticed that all the major policies of Lytton had been attacked by Liberals and subsequently revoked. Now they saw Ripon, despite support from the prime minister, become the object of

attack by the British community, which generated public meetings, petitions, agitations and speeches, especially over the Ilbert Bill. In this pattern of events Indians recognised that British rule, however autocratic, operated on several different levels and that one level could be used against another. Official policy could be changed through organisation and campaigning; in effect, Indians must copy British political methods. As a result, between the 1880s and the 1930s, Indian nationalists developed what today is known as a culture of democratic politics even though as yet most of them had no formal political role. This process represented a vital complement to the long-term implementation of institutional reform, and was, arguably, the most significant Liberal contribution to the evolution of modern India.

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After the controversies associated with Ripon his successors, Lords Dufferin, Lansdowne and Elgin, took care to calm the British community by promising an end to reform but they went some way to conciliating the nationalists. The Indian Councils Act (1892) allowed the provincial legislatures to be enlarged by the election of non-officials and to hold discussions of the annual budget. But Indian hopes were not significantly raised until the end of 1905 by the appointment of John Morley as secretary of state in the new Liberal government. A Radical Liberal the new minister enjoyed a reputation as a supporter of Irish home rule, though he was in fact much less sympathetic towards Indian aspirations. Moreover, he felt it wise to mitigate opposition at home by presenting any reforms as non-partisan compromises between himself and Lord Minto, the Tory viceroy. Now approaching the end of his career, Morley was determined to score a success in India. To this end he appointed two Indians to the viceroy's executive council in 1907. Under the Indian Councils Act (1909) he also doubled the Indian

representation at provincial level, effectively ending the official majorities. But, to reassure the British, the reforms created separate constituencies for groups such as Muslims and landowners, reflecting Minto's desire to weaken the claims of Congress to represent Indian opinion, and restricted voting to those paying 3,000 rupees income or land tax. As a result of these compromises, Morley's aim of conciliating moderate nationalist opinion was not fulfilled and Congress regarded them as a disappointment.²¹

To some extent, however, Morley's weakness was compensated by the next viceroy, Lord Hardinge (1910–1916).²² A lesser known but principled Liberal, Hardinge conspicuously offered public support to M. K. Gandhi's campaign of passive resistance in protest against the treatment of Indians in South Africa. Moreover, in 1911, he shrewdly abandoned the highly unpopular policy of partitioning Bengal into two provinces, introduced by Lord Curzon in 1904, and he transferred the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. These moves had the effect of pleasing Hindus without rewarding them for the agitation, conciliating Muslim sentiment as Delhi was the historic Muslim capital, and separating British government from the centre of controversy in Calcutta. The shift to Delhi had long-term implications. In future it would be easier to devolve power to the provinces, and thus to Indians, while leaving the imperial government intact. Though criticised in the House of Lords, Hardinge's strategy proved popular with nationalists and pointed the way forward for Liberal reform.

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During the First World War, the nationalist pressure on the British was greatly accelerated by rapid inflation in India, by the campaigns of the Home Rule Leagues, by Hindu–Muslim collaboration under the 1916 Lucknow Pact, and by the inauguration of Gandhi's

agitations which led to a huge expansion of the Congress. The cumulative effect of these activities was to raise Indian aspirations and to complicate the British aim of diverting moderate nationalists into cooperating with the official reforms. Against this background the last Liberal secretary of state, Edwin Montagu, assumed office in 1917.²³ Montagu enjoyed experience as under-secretary of state for India and through his tour of India in 1912, which was unusual for a minister. Frustrated by the conservatism of the bureaucracy, Montagu handled the situation boldly. He effectively settled British policy in August 1917 with a famous declaration that Britain's aim for India was to develop self-governing institutions 'with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire'. After a second visit to India in which he consulted nationalist opinion, Montagu drew up detailed reforms in April 1918 which left the central administration intact but created a system of 'dyarchy', or a division of powers, in the provinces; while the provincial governments retained control of revenue, other subjects including agriculture, education, health and public works were transferred to Indian control. Seventy per cent of the provincial legislatures were to be elected by 5.5 million voters.

Unfortunately, these innovations were partly undermined by the Rowlatt Acts (1919), which introduced trial without jury for crimes of sedition, and by the Amritsar Massacre of 1919 in which nearly 400 Indians were killed by British troops under General Dyer. Montagu, who condemned Dyer's conduct, was attacked in the Commons by Sir William Jonson-Hicks for 'the criminal betrayal of every white man and woman in India'. These events led to Gandhi's first national satyagraha, then to the Khilafat Campaign on behalf of Muslims, and to the Non-Cooperation campaigns from 1920 to 1924. As a result, Montagu's reforms failed

to detach the moderate nationalists. On the other hand, with the end of Non-Cooperation in 1924 and Gandhi's imprisonment, Congress did agree to participate in national elections capitalising on its grassroots machine and the two million members it had recruited.

Moreover, Montagu's Liberalism was complemented by Lord Reading (Rufus Isaacs), the Liberal viceroy from 1921–26, who believed in self-government and disliked racial discrimination.²⁴ He and Lady Read-

The Second World War helped determine the timing of independence, but the issue had effectively been settled by 1939.

ing became popular figures who invariably invited Indians to their functions. Hoping to reconcile the two communities, Reading visited Amritsar and he received Gandhi, their first meeting lasting four-and-a-half hours. Reading also pressed the London government to offer more places to Indians at Sandhurst, a policy that began in 1917 with just ten places for Indians each year, and he promoted an annual increase in the number of Indian officers in the Indian Civil Service as an essential preparation for self-government; thus, by 1929, the ICS included 241 Indians to 881 British and, by 1939, 540 to 759.²⁵

Moreover, although Montagu's career was destroyed when Lloyd George sacked him in 1922, his reforms proved significant because they included a provision that, after ten years, a committee would be appointed to review their operation with a view to further instalments; reform was now a process not an event. Indeed, the government anticipated this by instituting a committee early in 1927. Admittedly, with the Liberal Party in headlong decline during the inter-war period, the direct influence of Liberals on India appears increasingly modest. Yet it continued

indirectly via Liberals like Sir John Simon, who had moved to the right as a National Liberal in 1931, and ex-Liberals, notably William Wedgwood Benn who had joined the Labour Party in 1927.

Yet the choice of Simon to prepare the 1927 Report on the next instalment of reform was unwise. Only nominally a Liberal by this time, he was prejudiced against the Indian nationalists, was reportedly baffled by the Indian question, and was congenitally reluctant to confront awkward issues.²⁶ His 1930 report was a 400-page-long document that simply avoided the key ques-

tion of dominion status, though to be fair it had already been outflanked by the declaration by the Conservative viceroy, Viscount Irwin, in favour of granting dominion status in 1929. Meanwhile, the National Government proceeded to enact the 1935 Government of India Act, which created thirty million voters, granted self-government in the provinces and would have implemented full self-government had the princes not failed to ratify the provisions for central government.

A more Liberal influence was that of William Wedgwood Benn who served as secretary of state in the 1929–31 Labour government and briefly again in 1945. In particular, he authorised Irwin to make his declaration on dominion status in October 1929, which was opposed by Simon and Lloyd George in parliament.²⁷ The eventual result was the 1935 Government of India Act which represented a bi-partisan policy backed by London and Delhi though resolutely opposed by right-wing Conservatives, led by Churchill, during the 1930s. The 1935 reforms in effect represented the final triumph of Liberalism in India. In the subsequent 1937 elections, Congress won majorities in six provinces and became the largest party in another three, leaving Indians quite close to self-rule during the

closing years of peace. The Second World War helped determine the timing of independence, but the issue had effectively been settled by 1939. ■

Martin Pugh was a lecturer in modern history at the Aligarh Muslim University, 1969–71. He was formerly Professor of Modern British History at Newcastle University and is the author of fifteen books on British political and social history including *Britain and Islam from 622 to the Present Day* (2019).

- 1 *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 38 (OUP, 2004), pp. 148–53; Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (CUP, 1994), pp. 30–1.
- 2 A Whig-Liberal by the 1830s, Macaulay supported free trade and parliamentary reform but was anti-Chartist. In 1833, he had been appointed the law member of the Governor-General's Council and in 1835 wrote a famous minute arguing for the use of English as the medium of instruction in India.
- 3 Quoted in Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (OUP, 1959), p. 56.
- 4 Quoted in Metcalf, *Ideologies*, p. 34.
- 5 Quoted in Edward Thompson, *The Life of Lord Metcalfe* (Faber and Faber, 1937), pp. 316–21.
- 6 Although Bentinck supported a free press, it was Sir Thomas Metcalfe (1785–1841) who introduced it in 1835, not an easy decision as the East India Company directors used this as an excuse for not ratifying his appointment as governor-general – a position he occupied for one year: ODNB, vol. 37. pp. 948–52.
- 7 See John Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck* (Chatto and Windus, 1974); ODNB, vol. 5, pp. 269–74.
- 8 Rosselli, *Bentinck*, pp. 78–86.
- 9 See S. C. Ghosh, *Dalhousie in India 1848–1856* (Allen and Unwin, 1975); S. C. Ghosh, 'The utilitarianism of Dalhousie and the material improvement of modern India', *Modern Asian Studies*, Feb. 1978; ODNB, vol. 45, pp. 937–43.
- 10 Ainslie Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India* (Allen and Unwin, 1962), pp. 271–4.
- 11 See John Pemble, *The Raj, The Indian Mutiny and the Kingdom of Oudh 1801–1858* (Harvester Press, 1977).
- 12 See T. R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India 1857–70* (Princeton University Press, 1964); Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (Routledge, 1971); K. Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).
- 13 The racial bias even among reformers was evident in the reluctance of some suffragists to extend the vote to the women of Spain, Italy and other Mediterranean societies as opposed to those of the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries: Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women* (OUP, 2000), pp. 53–4.
- 14 'The Education of the People of India', p. 192, quoted in Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, p. 46.
- 15 Dinyar Patel, *Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2020), pp. 96–9, 102, 106.
- 16 Patel, Naoroji, pp. 51–5, 62; ODNB, vol. 40, pp. 42–3.
- 17 Martin Pugh, *Britain and Islam: From 622 to the present day* (Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 123–4.
- 18 ODNB, vol. 52, pp. 213–14.
- 19 See A. Denholm, *Lord Ripon 1827–1909* (Chatto and Windus, 1982); S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Ripon 1880–84* (CUP, 1953); ODNB, vol. 47, pp. 332–8.
- 20 R. J. Moore, *Liberalism and Indian Politics 1872–1922* (Edward Arnold, 1966), pp. 36–40.
- 21 For assessments, see S. E. Koss, *John Morley at the India Office* (Yale University Press, 1969); S. A. Wolpert, *Morley and India 1906–19* (University of California Press, 1967).
- 22 Viscount Hardinge of Penshurst (1858–1944) was a diplomat and civil servant. His entry in the ODNB, vol. 25., pp. 177–81, does not do justice to his Liberalism.
- 23 See S. D. Waley, *Edwin Montagu* (Asia Publishing House, 1964); K. O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1916–1922* (OUP, 1979); ODNB, vol. 38, pp. 716–20.
- 24 ODNB, vol. 29, pp. 404–11.
- 25 Denis Judd, *Lord Reading* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1992), pp. 213, 219.
- 26 David Dutton, *Simon: A biography of Sir John Simon* (Aurum Press, 1992), pp. 85–7, 91–3; ODNB, vol. 50, pp. 663–6.
- 27 Wedgwood Benn, became a Liberal MP in 1906 but joined Labour in 1927 and was elevated as Lord Stansgate in 1942, gaining a reputation as a 'happy warrior' for liberalism in the Lords: ODNB, vol. 5, pp. 94–6.

Was J. R. Seeley in reality the apologist for imperialism he is often regarded as? Jon Parry examines Seeley's best-selling *The Expansion of England*.

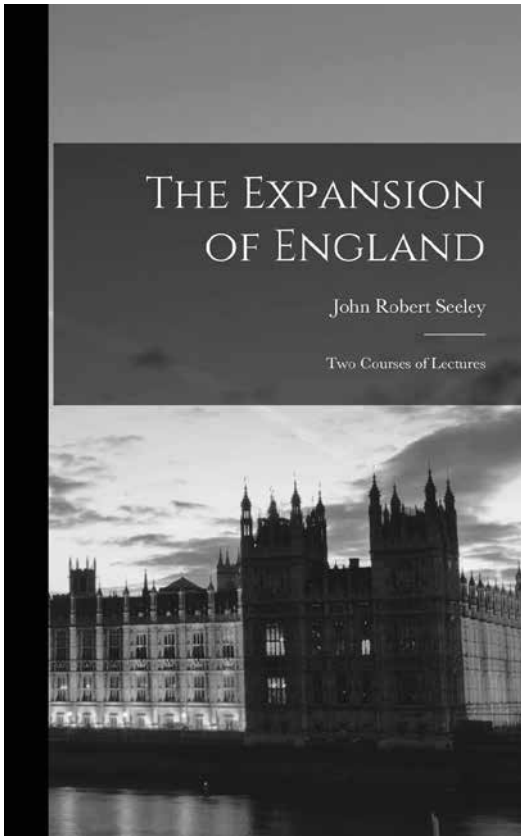
John Robert Seeley, Liberalism and empire

IN 1883, A historical survey of the British empire became a publishing hit: 80,000 copies were sold in two years. The book was *The Expansion of England* by John Robert Seeley, an academic historian who had been Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge since 1869. The timing was excellent. Its publication coincided with newspaper excitement about the European competition for territory in Africa – the ‘Scramble for Africa’. The book played an important role in explaining the empire to the British public in attractive terms, and therefore popularising the imperial idea in the late nineteenth century. It had a major impact on the thought of Lord Rosebery, who arranged for Seeley to be awarded the KCMG while he was Liberal prime minister in 1894. After Seeley's early death in 1895, there was a campaign to commemorate his legacy as a public intellectual. In Cambridge, a fund was established in his name, which was attached to the library of the Cambridge History Faculty. Until 2008, his imprint was visible in the study of history in Cambridge in another way too: the main undergraduate course on territories outside Europe and the United States was called ‘The Expansion of Europe’.

In recent years, there has been a lot of historical interest in nineteenth-century ideas of empire, and specifically in writers, like Seeley,

who presented a liberal vision of it. These liberal imperialists have come in for heavy criticism for the selective zeal with which they advocated the imperial project. They presented it as a beneficial process that could spread civilisation, while giving very little thought to the native populations of the conquered lands. Seeley, for example, celebrated the determination with which British emigrants had settled on ‘comparatively empty’ lands in North America and Australasia and turned them into thriving and productive farming communities. He assumed that the native races there lacked the resources to compete economically or technologically, so he had no moral qualms about their surrender to European dominance.¹ As a result, he has been swept up in the recent culture wars about the benefits and failings of empire. In 2021, Cambridge students began a campaign to remove his name from the history library, citing him as an apologist for colonialism and British imperial conquest.

It is worth exploring in more detail what motivated Seeley to write about empire, not in order to justify any of his views but so as to understand his preoccupations and those of other liberal intellectuals who thought like him. *The Expansion of England* is best seen as a product of his broader anxieties about Britain's prospects as a political and moral



community. It was accidental that he became best known as an imperialist; he never visited the empire and seems to have given very little thought to it until the late 1870s. Even after that, he was not among those who advocated a new empire in Africa.² He was also more pessimistic about the prospects of his liberal vision of empire than is often assumed. His book came out of a lecture course which he devised as a pedagogical tool to explain to his students what was unsatisfactory about contemporary party politics and contemporary ways of writing history. He aimed to show them that both parties, Liberal and Conservative, had perverted history in order to fit the needs of modern political sloganeering, and that students had a duty, when they grew up, to lead a more rigorous public debate about Britain's duties and requirements as a world power.

Sir John Robert Seeley (1834–95) (Photo by W. & D. Downey, 1870s; © National Portrait Gallery, London)

The battle of values in Britain

Seeley's main aim was for his students to gain a proper historical perspective on the world around them. He wanted to persuade them that British expansion across the North American continent, and the harnessing of its enormous natural resources, was the most important story in modern British history. He insisted that the developments in domestic policy since 1688, on which too many of them focused, were trivial in comparison.³ That was why he criticised Cambridge's emphasis on narrowly British rather than extra-European history.

He wanted students to see the colonies as a set of communities of Britons who

had settled in underdeveloped parts of the world and had cultivated them with their skill and capital. His lectures focused on Britain's expansion into North America and Australasia because he saw the settlements formed there as extensions of its domestic regime, which would benefit from the same liberal values that should be applied at home. The underlying theme of his public writing during these decades was that public men in Britain should cherish its free institutions, and work towards national social progress based on class harmony and shared moral values. Therefore, he wanted the same process to apply to British settlements abroad. They should not be viewed as mere historical acquisitions, which could easily be abandoned; they were an integral part of the nation, and a national responsibility.

Together with most liberal intellectuals of his generation (he was born in 1834), Seeley's main concern was how to preserve Britain's public values at a time of rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, and political change, especially once most urban workingmen were given the vote in the 1867 Reform Act. Teaching the urban democracy the need to cohere as a national community became one of his major preoccupations. His evangelical background left him with the assumption that the Protestant religion was an essential component of Britishness, but, together with most liberals of his generation, he turned against the dogmatism and divisive Calvinism of traditional evangelicals. Instead, he followed F. D. Maurice and other broad churchmen in hoping that the nation could rally around a Christian morality broadly based on humanity, family love, and service. (An earlier book of his, *Ecce Homo*, had stressed the centrality of humanitarian social teaching to Christianity.) Seeley, along with most broad churchmen, rejected the Protestant Nonconformist view that voluntary effort alone would ensure social harmony and progress. Instead, he

insisted that the state must itself embody and promote high moral ideals, consensually. So, there should be an established state Church, and compulsory teaching of an undogmatic religion in schools. Similarly, he maintained that the emigration of British subjects would not automatically lead to happy colonies. The British state needed to oversee their affairs and to cultivate their loyalty to the Crown, even while settlers developed self-governing expertise locally.⁴

When Seeley returned to Cambridge as Regius Professor in 1869, after a period teaching Classics in London, he was already known as an advocate of a logical approach to understanding the past, and as a critic of romantic and moralistic styles of history. He saw the role as a chance to give students a more rigorous and socially useful historical training. In his inaugural lecture, in 1870, he urged much more focus on recent and contemporary history – at the expense of classical and renaissance studies – because it had most to teach the students of the day. Cambridge, he thought, had a general mission of political education, and a more specific one to train up future politicians and civil servants. The Cambridge history degree course was set up in 1873, in response to the government's decision in 1870 to make entry to the home civil service depend on competitive exams, including one in history. Similar exams were already used for the Indian civil service, established in 1853. So, several lecture courses were put on mainly as preparation for these examinations, including Seeley's lectures that became *The Expansion of England*. These were two sets of eight lectures, one in Michaelmas 1881 on Britain in the Americas, and one in Lent 1882 on Britain in India. They embodied Seeley's principle that history should involve 'large considerations': students should be introduced to big subjects and taught to draw useful lessons.⁵ He wanted them particularly to think about the duties of the state: it was 'the

noblest object of human contemplation, the most vital subject for human enquiry'.⁶

Britain's expansion overseas was a timely subject because domestic politics had become very partisan in the 1870s. Mass national parties were developing in order to organise the expanded electorate, and the Liberal and Conservative party leaders, Gladstone and Disraeli, were becoming semi-presidential figures in the popular imagination. Foreign and imperial issues were at the heart of this party controversy. Should Britain fight Russia in a war over the Ottoman empire, or the Afghan War to defend India? What should it do about the rise of Germany, united in 1871, and the United States, reunited after the Civil War in 1865? Could it afford to remain uninvolved in all these global tensions and just to focus on humanitarianism and on trade? In 1878, Gladstone wrote an article called 'England's mission', for the *Nineteenth Century*. Politicians on all sides pontificated about what this mission should involve – but had very different answers. Many Liberals upheld the legacy of Richard Cobden, the 'Manchester school' and the peace movement – that Britain should keep out of wars, should not spend vast sums on ships and soldiers, and should just aspire to trade with the whole world, benefiting itself and others. The non-interventionist foreign policy of Gladstone's first government (1868–1874) encouraged the impression that these Cobdenite principles were taking over the Liberal Party, and that the Liberals no longer wished to spend any money on the defence of British colonies. Meanwhile the Liberal press started to make an alternative claim: that the Conservative leader Disraeli was beguiling the expanded electorate into an aggressive policy, of 'imperialism', or 'jingoism', based on blind celebration of English greatness and English national destiny. In the late 1870s, therefore, a

culture war developed about Britain's place in the world.

Seeley hated the crude divisiveness of partisan politics, so damaging to national harmony, and hated this culture war in particular. He was on holiday in 1879 when he had the idea for a course of lectures to correct these misunderstandings, telling Oscar Browning that he felt a heavy responsibility to work out

His lectures clearly identified 'the two schools of opinion among us with respect to our Empire': the 'bombastic' and the 'pessimistic'. Disraeli and the Tories were bombastic romantics ...

and explain the right idea of Britain's development.⁷ His lectures clearly identified 'the two schools of opinion among us with respect to our Empire': the 'bombastic' and the 'pessimistic'. Disraeli and the Tories were bombastic romantics, talking the language of heroism and honour, and 'lost in wonder and ecstasy at the empire's immense dimensions'. The Cobdenite view was similarly extreme in the other direction, seeing the empire as a useless burden and immoral excrescence, 'founded in aggression and rapacity'.⁸ The popular moralistic historians of the day, such as T. B. Macaulay and Charles Kingsley, had helped politicians to slip into these misconceptions of Britain's position in the world, through their emphasis on racialism. They had lauded the 'genius of the Anglo-Saxon race', cultivating the idea that the English had a unique talent for government, a unique understanding of liberty, and a unique mission to spread civilisation.⁹ They had spread the comforting myth that the world was naturally developing the way the English wanted – through trade, and through admiration for the English constitution.

Seeley's lectures critiqued all these race-based rhetorical boasts about England's mission. His rejection of racialist lines of

argument is ironic, given that his critics today now accuse him of racialism in another sense – his inadequate attention to the existence of indigenous people. The second set of lectures, on India, mainly attacked the view that Britain had a right to rule India because of British racial superiority to the Indians. The first set asked how far this comforting myth of British racial superiority explained anything about British expansion into the American continent, which had ended with British dominance of Atlantic trade, and the emergence of a new Anglo-Saxon power, the United States.

The Americas

Seeley insisted that it was unscientific to explain this ‘Anglo-Saxon’ dominance in terms of racial factors. Such generalisations derived from the error of studying ‘history only in single states’.¹⁰ Comparative history – the simultaneous study of the European empires on the American continent – punctured lazy claims of English racial superiority. England had become the world’s greatest economic power, but not because Englishmen had ‘the blood of the Vikings ... nor the industrial genius of the Anglo-Saxon’, as Macaulay, Kingsley or E. A. Freeman might say. It was because of economics and geopolitics. England came to dominate Atlantic trade, and imported and exported essential factory materials, while France and Spain were bogged down in wars for supremacy on the European continent. England dominated the trade of the New World not because she ‘surpassed the others in daring or invention or energy’, but because she was the country ‘least hampered by the Old World’.¹¹

Seeley also showed how all the European empires had made bad mistakes in the Americas, with the result that they had lost most of their territory. Spain, Portugal, France, and Holland had been driven out of the continental landmass almost completely, while Britain

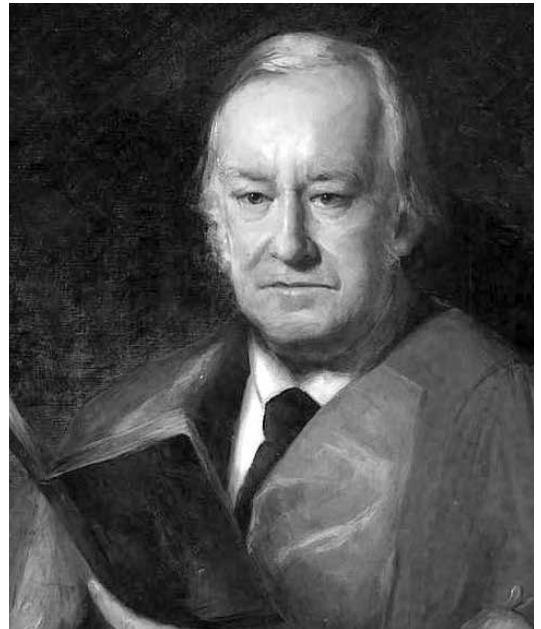
just retained Canada and a few Central American footholds. Through greed, the Europeans had misjudged how empires work. The fundamental mistake was Spain’s original vision of the New World as an opportunity to be exploited: ‘an estate which was to be worked for the benefit of the mother-country’.¹² The Spanish in South America assumed they could subordinate local peoples by force, and did not need to develop a genuine community of interest – but this strategy did not succeed, because they were massively outnumbered by locals. Eighteenth-century Britons behaved equally badly: they led ‘the monstrous and enormous atrocities of the slave-trade’.¹³ Britain exploited its American subjects through a protectionist colonial system designed to extract their resources and tax them heavily. Like Spain, Britain treated the colonists as ‘possessions’, not as ‘extensions of us’. We ‘fine[d] the colonists for the benefit of the home traders’.¹⁴ If imperialism is defined as a system of exploitation, Seeley was one of its greatest critics.

To Seeley, therefore, the rebellion of the thirteen American colonies was justified. Their free institutions, and a common religious mindset founded on their church communities, had helped them to create a successful and dynamic polity.¹⁵ The United States now challenged British power. The advent of steam and electricity also changed geopolitical calculations, allowing more distant places to be brought under one government. British world power was based on its navy, but now it was possible to envisage both the United States and Russia becoming vast land powers.¹⁶

This was the basis of Seeley’s disagreement with Cobdenite Liberals, and Gladstone. He thought that they took a complacent view of the rise of the United States, because they regarded Americans as ‘kin beyond sea’, as Gladstone called them in another of his 1878 articles, this time for the North American

Review. Seeley rejected this romantic racialist argument about innate British affinity with the United States. In hard-headed power terms, he argued, the United States were a threat to Britain, because they possessed the ingredients of superpowerdom – they started with deep-rooted religious belief, developed distinct economic strengths, and expanded into new land. Migrants from other countries settled in the United States and became Americans. Even Canadians modified their behaviour from when they were in England, and started to think like Americans, because of commonalities of land settlement, climate, trade, and culture.¹⁷

Seeley could easily imagine Canada leaving the British connection and joining the United States, especially now that American unity had been re-established at the end of the Civil War. Canada had been enlarged into a transcontinental country between 1867 and 1871, but many British people, following Cobden, thought that its separate existence was unsustainable, and its defence (against the United States) unnecessarily expensive for British taxpayers. The radical politician Charles Dilke became a leading proponent of this view. In 1868, he published a book called *Greater Britain*, which discussed the same phenomenon as Seeley, the spread of British political and moral values through overseas settlement. Dilke, however, defined this Greater Britain in cultural and racial terms, in terms of English-speaking identity, rather than in terms of political structures. For him, a strong United States was an essential player in a future liberal world, so its absorption of Canada would be beneficial. Seeley's broad church statist philosophy led him to take issue with Dilke.¹⁸ For Seeley, 'Greater Britain' had to mean the extension of the English state and government, not just the voluntary expansion of the English race.¹⁹ North America was a British problem, not an opportunity. Britain had to create a genuine community of interest



Seeley, portrait by Clara Ewald (1859–1948)

with the Canadians, in order to weaken a future United States challenge to British global power. Seeley's point was that, on the American continent, Britain must think about power, not race.

Seeley's first set of eight lectures therefore concluded that the British had misgoverned their American territories in the past, by pursuing exploitation rather than community solidarity, and were in danger of mishandling what remained of them now, through complacency about a natural liberal affinity with the United States.

India

When the students reassembled after Christmas, Seeley turned his fire on all those who used 'Oriental bombast' to claim that Britain had a natural destiny to run an Indian empire.²⁰ This was clearly an attack on Disraeli's Tories, but also on the smugness of Whig historians like Macaulay, once an administrator in India, who had assumed that



Images of Empire:

Left: 'The Rhodes Colossus' – cartoon by Edward Linley Sambourne, published in *Punch* after Cecil Rhodes announced plans for a railway connection and telegraph line from Cape Town to Cairo in 1892
Right: 'Justice' – the British suppression of the Indian rebellion; a print by Sir John Tenniel in a September 1857 issue of *Punch*

English values would naturally win out there. Macaulay and other triumphalists implied that India had been conquered through English superiority, the 'heroic qualities' of the English race, and their 'natural genius for government'. Macaulay's essay on Robert Clive had attributed Clive's victories to the abilities of 'the mighty children of the sea', whereas Seeley stressed the contribution of the Indian troops, the sepoys.²¹

Seeley showed that 'what is called the conquest of India by the English' can be explained 'without supposing the natives of India to be below other races, just as it does not force us to regard the English as superior to other races'.²² Actually Britain had never conquered India, because it faced the

same problems in India as the Spanish had in South America. British India was an 'artificial' empire because the locals massively outnumbered the British, and there was no way they could be permanently assimilated. The climate made large-scale British settlement impossible.²³ Britain had subordinated India by exploiting divisions among Indians and arming some against others. The same tactic explained the defeat of the 1857 uprising against British rule. This was not difficult, because there were so many different loyalties and religions. If a nationalism could emerge in India with the same force as in Italy, 'the English Power ... must succumb at once'.²⁴

Seeley showed that the British had misgoverned India, just as they had misgoverned

America. In the process, however, they had destroyed the authority and capacity of the old ruling classes and had undermined the hold of the native religions. In other words, they had removed any basis for a successful indigenous political community. This allowed him to argue that ‘to withdraw our Government from a country which is dependent on it and which we have made incapable of depending upon anything else, would be the most inexcusable of all conceivable crimes’. ‘There are some deeds which, though they had been better not done, cannot be undone.’²⁵ On the bright side, perhaps Britain had a providential task to build something better from these mistakes.

There is no reason to doubt his genuine embarrassment and regret at the destructive impact of British power in India. He had no detailed prescriptions for how modern Britons might tackle the challenge which they had inherited: India was hardly a specialism of his, and his concern was to cultivate a sense of responsibility in his students, who might become future Indian civil servants. His lectures repeatedly warned them against complacency in the task. We should avoid the ‘optimistic commonplaces of the newspaper’. Our Western civilisation ‘is perhaps not absolutely the glorious thing we like to imagine it’. The British were destroying bad things and good things together; sometimes it was not clear what good things they were creating.²⁶

The saving grace was that Britain had time to develop beneficial policies, because there was currently no Indian nationalist movement, so the immediate and urgent question was whether it could be defended from Russia. Britain could probably cope with a Russian invasion or with an internal mutiny, but not with both at the same time.²⁷ Here again Seeley revealed himself to be a liberal. He insisted that Russia was less of a threat than the dynamic and coherent United

States, and less than militarist Tories pretended with their war talk, because it was a chaos of warring entities; it was less of a national unity than it pretended. ‘If [Greater Britain] will not be stronger than the United States, we may say with confidence that it will be far stronger than the great conglomeration of Slavs, Germans, Turcomans and Armenians, of Greek Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Mussulmans and Buddhists, which we call Russia.’²⁸

Conclusion

The publication of *The Expansion of England* made Seeley a public figure. As one contemporary wrote, it also ‘brought the weight of Liberal authority’ to the defence of empire. His high-minded vision of empire as an extension of the domestic family, and domestic responsibilities, made it easier for liberal-minded people to identify publicly with the cause – as did endorsements from rising stars such as Rosebery.²⁹ In 1884–85, many Liberal Party supporters were keen to find a way of making a greater commitment to empire, at a time when Gladstone’s government was enduring intense criticism from the pro-empire press for what seemed to be half-hearted policies in Sudan and southern Africa. As a result, the first of a number of cross-party campaigns for some form of imperial consolidation was launched. An Imperial Federation League was founded, and Seeley agreed to be chair of the Cambridge branch. No doubt he hoped that such a movement would educate public opinion to take the right view of empire. But his commitment to the movement remained at an abstract level: he did not get involved in detailed discussions about inter-colonial constitutional schemes or tariff policies. They came to nothing, in any case. Then the severe split in the Liberal Party in 1886 over Irish home rule triggered the defection of most of those keenest on empire, including Seeley. He

remained a Liberal Unionist for the rest of his life. Of those who stayed in the Liberal Party, a minority took up the banner of 'Liberal Impe-

Studying Seeley reminds us that idealistic liberal visions of empire have very often criticised its illiberal realities nearly as strongly as anti-imperialists have done.

rialism' in the 1890s, led by Rosebery and Edward Grey.³⁰

Seeley was a utopian visionary in some ways, but about politics in general more than about empire. His core vision was of an active state cultivating a national humanitarian community spirit, in pursuit of the general good. Though he acknowledged that this was an ideal, he felt that there were enough examples in British history of beneficial character-driven enterprise to make it plausible. The same values could in principle sustain an 'expansion of England' which would leave the temperate regions of the world better governed than they had been. But this was not the same as saying that the British empire had been, or was, an admirable regime. Seeley's message was not that the empire was a great family; it was that it would survive only if it became one. It would fall unless British administrators worked out how to create genuine communities of imperial sentiment in Canada and India alike.

Seeley was, therefore, a great critic of the mistakes made by past imperialists. He condemned the exploitation of local peoples, and the lack of concern with community or humanity, which had marked British policy in America and in India in the eighteenth century. He was also a great critic of the racist language of politicians and historians, which he blamed for the two main errors in modern imperial policy. The fallacy of 'sheer natural superiority'³¹ explained the unjustified arrogance with which many, especially on the right, regarded Britain's position in India,

but it also underpinned the complacency with which many others, especially on the left, approached the question of abandoning Canada and other strategic colonies.

Seeley's vision was itself a piece of history – it was a relic of the idealism of his generation of

young liberal intellectuals of the 1850s. Disciples of Thomas Arnold and F. D. Maurice, they tasked themselves with trying to find a new basis for national unity in response to the waning of landed power and the declining potency of evangelicalism. They hoped that free trade, advances in knowledge, religious pluralism, and family ideals might provide the building-blocks for greater class harmony and national economic and moral progress. By the late 1870s, however, there no longer seemed much hope of national unity; by the mid-1880s, division loomed everywhere. Like most liberal intellectuals, Seeley was by now very pessimistic about Britain's political future. He blamed the manufactured divisions and misleading language of the democratic party system – the 'interminable scurrilous brawl' of parties, weaving a 'web of falsehood and fallacy'.³² In particular, he blamed Gladstone's Liberal Party which, by adopting Irish home rule and seeming indifferent to Church establishments, had positioned itself 'in opposition to all the fundamental principles upon which not only the State, but morality and religion rest'.³³ Politicians were also failing to respond to the global challenges to British national power represented by the United States, Germany, and Russia, and by changes in commerce and technology.³⁴ It must be the task of the next generation of civil servants and politicians – his lecture audience – to work out how a sea power like Britain could tackle these challenges on the one hand, and the unfortunate legacy of a misgoverned India on the other.

For Seeley, the history lecturer was a preacher, charged with guiding the young how to approach their duties.³⁵ The teaching of history involved a political lesson, but also a methodological one. Historians themselves needed to abandon complacent arrogance about the British national story, and instead to study comparative history hard-headedly. As his student J. R. Tanner remarked, Seeley insisted that his classes must reject sloppy thinking, and avoid ‘fallacies in fine phrases’.³⁶ They should study power, economics, and geography with a clear head, and take these lessons into public life. Seeley wanted to professionalise the study of history. In fact, he only took professionalisation so far: he had not been trained as a historian himself and did not base his conclusions on detailed archival study. As a result, his legacy within the historical profession, and in Cambridge, was less, in the long run, than that of younger and more scholarly colleagues such as F. W. Maitland.

Seeley would not have wanted to be seen as a diehard defender of the empire as it actually was. It is best to view him as a moralistic visionary about what it needed to be, and as an academic critic of dominant, partisan and racially motivated interpretations of England’s mission. Studying him reminds us that idealistic liberal visions of empire have very often criticised its illiberal realities nearly as strongly as anti-imperialists have done.

Jonathan Parry is the author of five books on nineteenth-century British history. He has just retired from teaching at the University of Cambridge.

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- 2 Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), p. 171.
- 3 Seeley, *Expansion*, pp. 120–2.

- 4 Richard Shannon, ‘John Robert Seeley and the idea of a National Church’, in R. Robson (ed.), *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain* (London, 1967), pp. 236–67.
- 5 J. R. Tanner, ‘John Robert Seeley’, *English Historical Review*, 10 (1895), p. 510.
- 6 This was H. A. L. Fisher’s summary of his philosophy, in ‘Sir John Seeley’, *Fortnightly Review*, 60 (1896), p. 183.
- 7 Deborah Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 7–8.
- 8 Seeley, *Expansion*, p. 293.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 80; see Wormell, *Sir John Seeley*, pp. 126, 130–1.
- 10 Seeley, *Expansion*, p. 98.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 97.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 136–7.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 50, 155–6.
- 18 Seeley seems to have revised his thinking on this point: in an earlier lecture, of 1872, he had accepted Dilke’s main argument: Wormell, *Sir John Seeley*, 156.
- 19 Seeley, *Expansion*, pp. 42–3.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 300–2.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 200–1, 218.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 205–6.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 185.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 227, 233.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 193, 196.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 305.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 29 Peter Burroughs, ‘John Robert Seeley and British imperial history’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1 (1973), p. 205.
- 30 H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The ideas and politics of a post-Gladstonian elite* (Oxford, 1973).
- 31 Seeley, *Expansion*, p. 295.
- 32 Seeley, ‘Ethics and religion’, *Fortnightly Review*, 45 (1889), p. 511.
- 33 Wormell, *Sir John Seeley*, p. 171.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.
- 35 Burroughs, ‘John Robert Seeley’, p. 194.
- 36 Tanner, ‘John Robert Seeley’, pp. 507–8.

‘Sane Imperialism’: The Liberal Party and the issue of empire at elections, 1880–1914

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the Liberal Party and empire during the high age of British imperialism was both delicate and complex. While the schism of 1886 over Irish home rule saw the departure of some of the party’s most imperialistically minded big beasts to the ranks of the Liberal Unionists (most notably Lord Hartington and Joseph Chamberlain), other ‘Liberal Imperialists’ remained. Led by Lord Rosebery, H. H. Asquith, Richard Haldane, and Edward Grey, these MPs rose to prominence following the retirement of Gladstone in 1894, and supported the Second Boer War which began in 1899. They were imperialists in the sense that they believed that, if colonies were administered liberally and judiciously and territorial expansion directed in pursuit of an ethical foreign policy rather than towards expanding the empire for its own sake, Liberals could be firm but pragmatic managers of imperial affairs whose judgement would be unclouded by the jingoistic bluster liable to seduce Conservatives. An ‘active’ imperial policy could also promote political and diplomatic stability

worldwide, as well as improve the lives of colonial subjects abroad and the working classes at home. In 1899, Rosebery christened this policy ‘sane Imperialism’.¹ On the opposite side stood the party’s radical wing, led by William Harcourt, John Morley, Wilfrid Lawson, and others. Better understood as ‘imperial sceptics’ than avowed anti-imperialists, these men’s detestation of military action inclined them towards pacifism. They also believed that imperial expansion made little economic sense (representing a net loss to the exchequer) and also levied a domestic political cost because its domination of the parliamentary agenda served to delay much-needed social reform. Due in part to this disagreement, the Liberal Party of the 1890s was intellectually confused and politically divided, and it fell to Henry Campbell-Bannerman to provide leadership from the centre and a bridge between these two opposed camps.

Division in the parliamentary party represented only half of the Liberals’ ‘imperial problem’ however. The other lay in the realm of popular politics because it seemed that the



Top: Liberal Party poster, c. 1905–1910. The Free Trade shop is full of customers due to its low prices, while the shop based on Protectionism suffers from high prices and a lack of custom.
Bottom: 'The Only Hope is Tariff Reform', Conservative Party election poster, 1906.

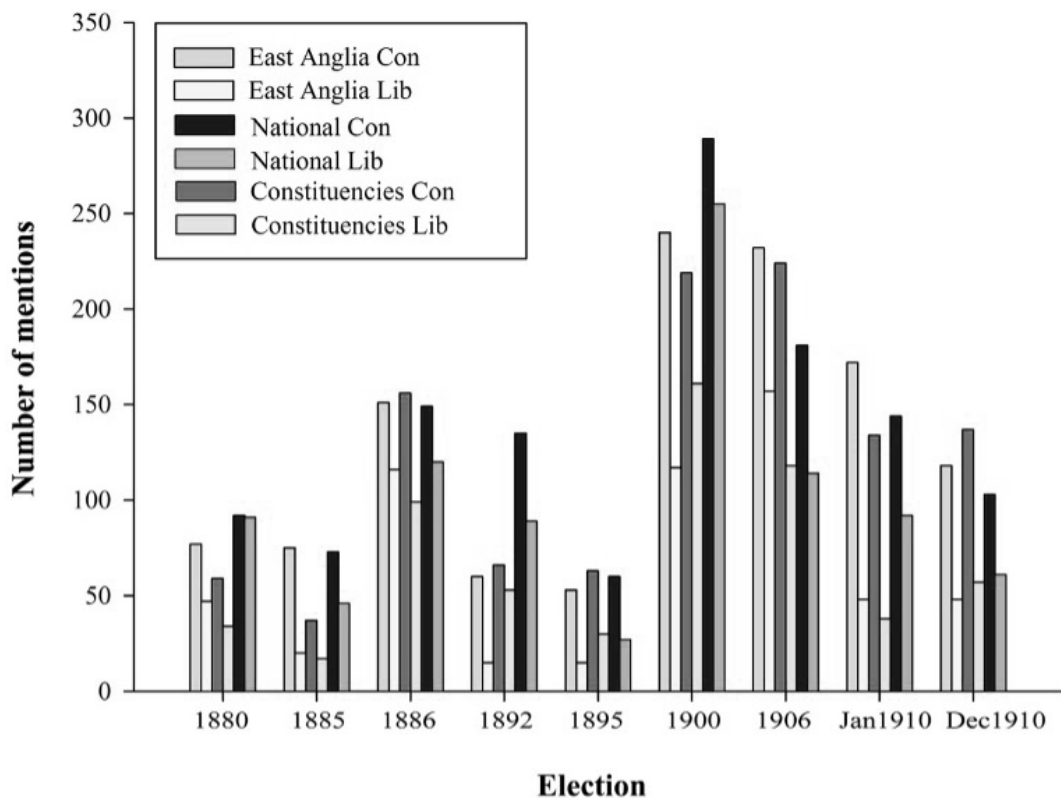


Figure 1: The Language of Imperialism, 1880–1910. Graph includes lemmas ‘imperial’, ‘empire’, ‘colony’, ‘flag’ and ‘British’ combined in each bar. Liberal Unionist speakers are excluded from these readings.

Conservatives had turned empire into a powerful and populist electoral weapon. According to H. C. G. Matthew, this had begun as early as 1872 with Disraeli’s Crystal Palace speech, which had ‘seized the wand of patriotism from the dead Palmerston’s hand, and captured the initiative from the Liberal Party on the dominant theme of late Victorian Britain—imperialism’.² For Robert Mackenzie and Alan Silver, Disraeli’s oration had successfully ‘picked up the banner of Imperialism’.³ This was symbolised by the popularity of the Great MacDermott’s music hall song ‘By Jingo!’ in 1878 following Disraeli’s flashy triumph of gunboat diplomacy over Russia at the Congress of Berlin. The song coined the term ‘jingoism’ and featured the memorable chorus

‘We don’t want to fight but by jingo if we do, we’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, and got the money too!’ Other historians place the advent of popular imperialism slightly later, citing the alliance between the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists in 1886 as the key moment, which added what Ewen Green has called ‘the patriotic-imperial card’ to their electoral hand.⁴ By the 1890s, it certainly seemed to the Liberals that, on the issue of empire, the Conservatives had stumbled upon an endlessly exploitable rhetorical resource which could weave a spell over newly enfranchised working-class voters to make them forget their rational self-interest, and poll for the reactionary party which was least likely to pass reforms for their benefit. Accordingly,

Liberals came to regard imperialism rather despondently as a vote loser, whose prominence on the political agenda simply served to weaken the loyalty of their most reliable voting constituency.

In this article, I assess the issue of imperialism at the nine general elections held between Gladstone’s Midlothian campaign and the advent of the First World War. In this era, public speeches (reported very thoroughly in the press) were the primary tool of political communication, and I am concerned with assessing just how far imperialism really was a key campaign issue, both for the Liberals and their Unionist opponents. Secondly, I zoom in on the 1890s for two specific case studies, expanding on why the Liberals suffered so badly in the most imperial contest in the period: the ‘khaki election’ of 1900 held during the Second Boer War. Thirdly, I discuss how the Edwardian party learned from the failure of their late-Victorian predecessors and managed for the first time to separate imperialism and patriotism, crafting a strongly domestic-centred patriotic appeal which represented a repudiation of their opponents’ continued obsession with empire, especially Joseph Chamberlain’s politically disastrous policy of imperial preference.

Quantitative background analysis: the language of imperialism, 1880–1910

A key challenge faced by historians of elections in this period is establishing what the campaigns that proceeded them were actually about. In particular, which issues were emphasised by candidates and parties in speeches across the country, and where, when, and how did imperialism fit into this matrix? Given that an estimated billion words of speech was uttered throughout the country in a given campaign (which was reported, generally faithfully, in newspapers) historians have

naturally struggled to summarise historical sources so large that they would take several lifetimes to read. Looking at central campaigns is also only of limited use: party manifestos did not exist and, while national and central campaigning resources were assuming progressively greater importance, campaigns in the 650 constituencies remained highly localised in comparison to today. Historians have seldom been able to move beyond selected (often cherry-picked) quotations to characterise the huge variety of multifarious local campaigns. While not a perfect solution, I have developed a technique for quantifying broad linguistic trends using three multi-million-word databanks (‘corpora’) of party speeches digitised from local and national newspapers.⁵ The first is centred on a specific case-study region (East Anglia); the second consists of a broader sample of constituencies throughout the country; and the third comprises the speeches of frontbenchers reported in *The Times*. Together, these three corpora contain around five million words of campaign speech, and each is subdivided by party and by election year, with each sub-corpus weighted to be numerically equal.

While the corpus could be used to assess the visibility of any topic in electoral politics (for example the leadership of Gladstone in the 1880, 1885, 1886, and 1892 contests),⁶ we use it here to measure the visibility of imperialism throughout the period. We use a group of keywords (a ‘taxonomy’) which reliably correlates to occasions where party speakers talked about the empire. In this case, I have chosen ‘imperial’, ‘empire’, ‘colony’, ‘flag’ and ‘British’. Figure 1 shows comparable like-for-like readings for each of our three corpora at each of the nine elections, weighted to be equal to each other, with all words aggregated. There are four key findings. The first is the seeming validation of the Liberal belief that imperialism was a ‘Conservative issue’: their opponents, in East Anglia, in constituencies

outside it, and on the national campaign stage, led them in each equivalent subsample in all nine elections (twenty-seven separate comparisons). The Tory net score – between all three corpora across all elections – is 68 per cent higher. The second is that three elections – 1886, 1900, and 1906 – which were dominated by Irish home rule, the Boer War, and imperial preference respectively, are far more empire-focused than the others in the period. Other contests in the period show imperialism looming far less large, most strikingly 1895, an election frequently seen as an archetype of Salisburyian imperial appeal, where the empire in fact saw less visibility than comparatively fringe issues such as local veto (local referenda on public house closing).⁷ This suggests that imperialism was of intermittent, rather than continual, electoral significance in this period, meaning that even if it was a key trump card for the Liberals' opponents, the Unionists only got to play it occasionally.

While Figure 1's word counts are extremely enlightening in allowing us to gage the general visibility of imperialism in campaigns, it reveals nothing about what parties actually meant when they mentioned the empire, and how it was connected to political arguments. The corpus can once again provide invaluable assistance by illuminating key linguistic trends and broad vocabulary patterns. A computational analysis can list common collocates (words which appear in the same sentence or close to a given word) and rank them by 'lexical attraction', using a popular metric, the 'mutual information' (MI) score. This allows us to dig deeper into the underlying lexicography of party language in this thirty-year period.

Figure 2 shows the top twenty strongest collocates of 'empire' (for Conservatives and Liberals respectively) in our corpora. The results suggest strongly that, when the empire was mentioned by either party, it was usually in the context of upholding its 'unity',

'stability' and 'integrity'. However, it reveals important differences between the Liberals and the Conservatives, with the latter far more inclined towards emotive political arguments, for example 'dismemberment', 'disintegration', 'disruption', 'glorious', etc. Only four Conservative words might be judged as 'neutral' at face value ('within', 'parts', 'vast' and 'world'), whereas for the Liberals, thirteen ('parts', 'part', 'whole', 'up', 'our', 'the', 'is', 'are', 'than', 'about', 'this', 'of' and 'one') fit this description. The party's seemingly more diluted focus is also reflected by the fact that their MI score for their twentieth collocate ('Ireland') is 5.11, whereas the Conservatives' twentieth ('world') stands at a considerably stronger 8.14. Indeed, we need to read down the Tory list to number ninety-one before they drop below an MI of 5.11.

Figures 1 and 2 suggest that Conservative speakers did not just refer to the empire more often, but more persistently connected it to a smaller number of politically and emotionally charged values and arguments, whereas Liberal mentions were more multifarious. Figures 1 and 2 thus suggest that imperialism was a more consistently important part of the Conservative rhetorical armoury than the Liberals', both quantitatively and qualitatively. That there was a rhetorical contest for empire is beyond doubt, but that should not stop us from concluding that it was rather one-sided. While this finding seems at face value to reinforce the traditional reading that the Conservatives were unambiguously the party of empire, it also quantifies what this might actually have meant in practice, and from this, an important caveat emerges. Namely, the finding that late-Victorian and Edwardian Conservatives talked about imperialism almost twice as often as their Liberal contemporaries must be contextualised by the parallel observation that empire was almost certainly a less consistently central election issue in these three decades than historians have assumed.⁸

Rank	Co. Collocate	Freq.	MI score
1	dismemberment	33	12.2
2	disintegration	24	11.97
3	integrity	49	11.69
4	disruption	17	11.59
5	unity	60	11.34
6	glorious	14	10.64
7	Indian	12	10.48
8	safety	11	10.36
9	British	109	9.75
10	maintain	24	9.7
11	united	41	9.57
12	union	18	9.42
13	within	19	9.06
14	vast	10	9.01
15	Kingdom	14	8.9
16	parts	12	8.83
17	danger	12	8.71
18	welfare	10	8.7
19	heart	19	8.54
20	world	31	8.14

Rank	Co. Collocate	Freq.	MI score
1	integrity	27	10.82
2	disintegration	10	10.7
3	unity	21	9.76
4	British	69	9.09
5	parts	13	8.95
6	danger	12	8.71
7	part	23	7.63
8	whole	18	6.6
9	great	48	6.59
10	up	18	6.21
11	our	29	6.17
12	the	536	6.16
13	is	19	5.89
14	are	11	5.78
15	than	14	5.61
16	about	14	5.58
17	this	45	5.41
18	of	306	5.4
19	our	25	5.17
20	Ireland	11	5.11

Figure 2: Top 20 collocates of ‘empire’ in grassroots electoral language, 1880–1910. Conservatives are displayed left, the Liberals right.

It was a Conservative issue but formed a central pillar of election campaigns only when an imperial issue happened to be particularly politically salient. Because that was only the case in three elections out of nine in this period, we can conclude that the audience most transfixed by the populist spectre of electoral jingoism was in fact the Liberal Party, who were more fearful of its political influence than perhaps they should have been.

Case Study 1: Imperialism in the election of 1900

While the above analysis gives us interesting macroscopic data, the subtleties of how

imperialism was actually used in elections can be more sharply (and entertainingly) illustrated with references to actual campaigns, especially from the general election of 1900, held when British troops in southern Africa appeared to be closing in on victory against President Kruger and the Boers following the relief of Mafeking five months previously. The Conservatives, led by Lord Salisbury, undoubtedly felt confident that they would be re-elected with a landslide victory of similar magnitude to the 152-seat majority they secured in 1895. The Liberals, now without Gladstone (who had retired in 1894, and died in 1898) faced a wartime ‘khaki’ election. Many were extremely pessimistic of their

prospects, and many campaigned explicitly on the ticket of strengthening the opposition benches rather than making a serious bid to take office.⁹ Morley lamented the plight of constituency workers and grassroots activists, writing that he did not 'very well know what to say to our poor sheep wandering around in the wilderness' and the party left a record 163 constituencies uncontested.¹⁰

On the campaign trail, the Liberals swiftly discovered that their opponents were

out its folds and brought freedom to the slave, comfort to the oppressed, may once more honour the name of Victoria'.¹²

Conservative praise for the empire was not simply confined to abstract jingoism, and many celebrated the expansion of imperial territory. Harry Bullard (Norwich) boasted that 'Lord Salisbury had demonstrated the might of the empire by sending 200,000 men 7,000 miles', a military manoeuvre which,

according to Captain Pretyman (Woodbridge), 'no other nation could hope to accomplish'.¹³ More worryingly still for the Liberals, the Conservatives not only labelled them as weak and divided, but also questioned their national

While few Conservatives had qualms about calling themselves 'imperialists', many Liberals of 1900 outside the outspoken Liberal Imperialist contingent remained instinctively uncomfortable with the term, which had connotations of reckless territorial expansion, military adventurism, and authoritarian regimes such as Napoleon III's France.

in no mood to draw a distinction between being an imperialist and being a patriot. W. L. Priorleau (East-Norfolk) 'pleaded' with his audience 'to vote straight for the Unionist party, for in so doing they would be doing their share in upholding the glory of the greatest empire that ever existed in the world' while H. S. Foster (Lowestoft) described the purpose of the election as to 'decide whether the great British Empire was to be maintained or not ... it was a battle between the Little Englander and the Big Englander'.¹¹ In King's Lynn, Thomas Gibson-Bowles pointed to a Union Jack pinned above his platform and asked his audience to:

Look at that flag ... it has a great and glorious history. There are no standards of Europe ... that have not gone down before that flag ... do not forget its past. That flag floated at the mainmast of the Victory when Nelson sailed into action at Trafalgar; that flag waved over the British squares at Waterloo ... God grant that this flag, which so many times has shaken

loyalty. Their pacifistic radical wing would, according to Ipswich candidate J. F. Rawlinson, make them 'shrink from the dread responsibility of war'.¹⁴ They would also give 'opposition to everything connected to the defence of the nation' (Samuel Hoare, Norwich) and make them 'turn tail and ran away' from the Boers (Priorleau).¹⁵ Even if a Liberal candidate was not a so-called 'pro-Boer' himself, he was still from the same party as sympathisers such as Ellis, Labouchere and Clark, who had been equivocal on the South African issue. This idea of 'guilt by association' was also extended more widely: to connect Liberals with the pro-Boer Irish Parliamentary Party, with the recently deceased Gladstone (who had memorably abandoned General Gordon to his fate in Khartoum in 1885), and to the anti-British continental press, who apparently wanted a Liberal victory.¹⁶ The dichotomy between militaristic loyalist and anti-imperial traitor was stark, and was augmented by the Unionists' decision to select a particularly high number of candidates who had served in the military,

with eight of their twenty East Anglian candidates having links to the forces.

While few Conservatives had qualms about calling themselves 'imperialists', many Liberals of 1900 outside the outspoken Liberal Imperialist contingent remained instinctively uncomfortable with the term, which had connotations of reckless territorial expansion, military adventurism, and authoritarian regimes such as Napoleon III's France. However, they drew a firm line between the imperial and the patriotic, and actually mentioned 'patriotism' more often than their opponents in all corpora, echoing Edward Grey's criticism of the Conservatives' 'gigantic imposture' to claim their party possessed a 'monopoly of patriotism'.¹⁷ In East Anglia, a King's Lynn Liberal declared, 'true liberalism in politics' as being 'purely patriotic in national service and national life' and Alderman Adams (Lowestoft) claimed 'I am neither Liberal nor Conservative, I am patriotic'.¹⁸ George White (North-West Norfolk) questioned the notion that 'every officer is a Tory' or that 'Tommy Atkins is a Unionist', and Richard Winfrey (South-West Norfolk) remarked that 'the Tory party might attempt to allocate themselves a monopoly on patriotism, but the Liberal Party were equally as patriotic as the Tories and equally proud of the British Empire'.¹⁹ The Liberals also developed their own version of patriotism in Rosebery's 'sane imperialism' which, in the context of 1900, continually evaluated generals' military decisions to improve future military efficiency, critiqued the government's preparations for war, and refused to neglect social conditions at home. 'Sane imperialists' might oppose excessive force not just for pacifistic reasons, but for diplomatic utility, with Winfrey, for example, arguing that the South African war 'might have been avoided with wiser and more tactful diplomacy', something that Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain (who had called Kruger a 'squeezed

sponge' and likened negotiating with Russia to 'supping with the devil with a long spoon') understood poorly.²⁰

While this 'sane imperialism' represented a determined attempt to challenge the resolutely imperial and militaristic Tory narrative of patriotism, Liberals were gloomily aware that they were fighting an uphill battle. A febrile wartime atmosphere was not an auspicious environment to make nuanced arguments or constructively critique the tactics and preparation of wildly popular military leaders like Lord Roberts. Conservatives could simply point at the Union Jack to make their argument, while Liberal rebuttal – what Herbert Samuel called their 'policy of rational patriotism' – required lengthy exposition.²¹ The election result – a second demoralising landslide defeat, this time by 134 seats – seemed to confirm these fears. Indeed, Liberal defensiveness over their patriotic credentials perhaps revealed an underlying pessimism in the electorate's political intelligence and a growing fear of the psychology of the herd.²² White bemoaned that 'the salvation of the Tories is the short memory of voters ... the curse of the military spirit which has been roused ... means the neglect of all social questions' and a depressed Harcourt reflected that the electorate had conceived of the war like 'a savage tribe'.²³ Much the same sentiment was echoed in the socialist journal *Justice* which complained that the electorate had treated the war issue with the civic consciousness of 'a howling, brutalised savage'.²⁴ Indeed, the radical organ of London working men's clubs, *Club Life*, reacted to the defeat by complaining that 'we are glad that manhood suffrage is not an acknowledged fact ... many of the people ... are too naturally ignorant to understand what an election really means ... they have no time to read and think – they know nothing of the great problems of our time'.²⁵ John Hobson, in his *Psychology of Jingoism* published in 1901, pointed

to the music hall's role in stoking up imperialist fervour, and the Liberals' pessimism at the electorate's limited intelligence was also connected to other bugbears, particularly the drink interest which they believed was insufficiently regulated by temperance legislation, and had, according to the *Liberal Suffolk Chronicle*, reduced the previous election to 'a battle of brains against beer' which the latter had won.²⁶ However, their analysis of the 1900 defeat also seemed to constitute an unstated admission that – while both parties advanced competing definitions of patriotism – the Unionist version was better adapted to the modern election platform precisely because it was so simple and intuitive. A rapidly expanding suffrage with many poorer men of limited political experience and education now wielding the franchise was an unforgiving environment for a self-consciously intellectual party, and the particular circumstances of a febrile khaki election made it politically untenable to force a dichotomy between 'sane' and 'insane' imperialism, or to decouple imperialism from patriotism.

Case Study 2: Imperialism in the election of 1906

While the Conservatives had been able to make imperialism and patriotism synonymous in the election of 1900, the circumstances changed markedly in 1906. In this campaign, Chamberlain's policy of tariff reform (or 'imperial preference' as he originally christened it) was explicitly designed to bind the mother country closer to her colonies with commercial ties.²⁷ His proposal was to place a series of tariffs on foodstuffs (including corn) imported from outside the British empire, creating a protected imperial free-trade zone and internal imperial market. In East Anglia, ten Unionists explicitly endorsed all his proposals as 'whole hoggers'

and praised his policy's imperial credentials. Francis Hervey (Bury St. Edmunds) described himself as 'a follower of that great colonial statesman, Mr. Chamberlain' and Raymond Boileau (East-Norfolk) claimed simply that 'he was an imperialist and a big Englander and wanted to see the colonies bound more closely to their mother country'.²⁸ Even amongst the remaining East Anglian candidates who sided with Arthur Balfour's more equivocal 'half hogger' position, none openly questioned the imperialist credentials of Chamberlain's manifesto, with even the sceptical Edward Wild (Norwich) declaring that a general measure of tariff reform was 'a policy which would ... consolidate the British Empire'.²⁹

Chamberlain's renewed appeal to the imperialism that had carried the Unionists to a landslide victory in 1900 seemed to stem, at least in part, from his faith in it as a populist electoral weapon.³⁰ But his attempt to once again use empire to claim the patriotic mantle misread the public's exhaustion with the war, which had dragged on until 1902, and had seemingly already contributed to a string of by-election losses.³¹ This dampening of public enthusiasm did much to deflate the Unionists' khaki patriotism, and reciprocally, to inflate aspects of the Liberals' domestic-centred counter which had struggled to fire in 1900.³² In 1904, Campbell-Bannerman reiterated the 'sane imperialism' line, declaring that 'true patriotism ... seeks not aggrandisement of any particular class or interest ... but the comfort, the improvement, and the best welfare of the people at large'.³³ A key guarantor of that welfare, of course, was cheap food, and adopting Chamberlain's protectionist proposals would, the Liberals argued, caused prices to rise: especially of bread, the staple food of the poor. Campbell-Bannerman's lead was followed at the grassroots in the election eighteen months later, and Liberals began to articulate a patriotism without its previous imperial

touchstone, with constituency speakers mentioning the word ‘patriot’ more than four times as often as Conservatives. Edward Beauchamp (Lowestoft) believed that ‘they heard a lot, probably too much, of the word “imperial”’. He thought all in that room were in one sense imperialists, [but] he did not agree with Mr Chamberlain in his interpretation and application of the word ... if our Empire was to be maintained, young people must be trained to temperance, thrift, manliness, and honesty’.³⁴ The Yarmouth clergyman, Reverend Guttery, also took aim at ‘the man in Birmingham’ who ‘was once more attempting to hold aloft the tattered flag of prostituted patriotism, and was a mere echo of the madness which had once deluded the nation, madness that they would be very glad to forget’. He went on to describe:

Two types of patriotism. There was the patriotism such as their fathers knew ... the patriotism that was willing to tell England, if need be, unpopular truths, the patriotism that was ready to work, suffer ... to widen the bounds of liberty and to win the people a good life [Cheers]. And there was the patriotism of swagger, the boasting and blatancy, the patriotism of the stock exchange, the patriotism of Park Lane, the patriotism that ... could not shout ‘rule Britannia’ except with a beery hick-up.³⁵

Outside East Anglia, Liberals made similar criticisms of the Unionists’ misplaced imperialism. George Lambert (Devon, South Molton) poured scorn over the ‘new imperial gospel of Mr. Chamberlain’ and mocked his proposal to exclude imported maize from tariffs, arguing that ‘maize is the food of pigs ... what imperial aspiration! Free food for an imperial race of pigs! [laughter]’.³⁶

In Derby, a local Liberal – J. P. G. Shires – explained the changing zeitgeist, stating that ‘the Tory party seemed to imagine that they enjoyed a monopoly on patriotism, and they delighted to dub their opponents Pro-Boers or Little Englanders; but the moral sentiments of the people were rising above such insults, and they were recognising that Jingoism and so-called Imperialism was not true patriotism’.³⁷ When the results were counted, the Liberals had managed to transform landslide loss into landslide victory, winning a majority of 128.

Perhaps Chamberlain’s mistake was to assume that a robust imperial appeal would automatically allow the Unionists to retain their pre-eminence as the patriotic party. Imperial preference *did* succeed in once again placing empire prominently on the 1906 election agenda, but this time it clearly failed to trump the Liberals’ counter-appeal to ‘domestic’ patriotism, suggesting that imperialism’s utility as a vote-winner was conditional, not universal. War weariness clearly helped tip the scales, but perhaps the decisive factor was simply that, however popular the imperial credentials of tariff reform might have been in isolation, they were poisoned by the spectre of rising food prices. In East Anglia, vivid Liberal anecdotes of a return to ‘the hungry forties’ under the Corn Laws were combined with famous posters such as ‘save the children

Imperial preference *did* succeed in once again placing empire prominently on the 1906 election agenda, but this time it clearly failed to trump the Liberals’ counter-appeal to ‘domestic’ patriotism, suggesting that imperialism’s utility as a vote-winner was conditional, not universal.

from Tariff Reform’ and ‘the big and the little loaf’ to create a simple and pithy electoral appeal powerful enough to smite Chamberlain’s offering, whether wrapped in the Union Jack or not. These appeals were allied with

popular exhibitionism (traditionally a Tory forte) featuring unappetising horseflesh sausage displays, didactic circus acts in seaside towns such as Yarmouth and Lowestoft and free trade song parties.³⁸ Chamberlain – the man Lloyd George described as ‘the raging bull from Birmingham ... smash[ing] up the great shop of the world’ – was cast as the pantomime villain.³⁹ Balfour was his comically pathetic subordinate, whom Daniel Goddard (Ipswich) dismissed as ‘the alleged leader who was really a lady help to Mr. Joseph Chamberlain’.⁴⁰ As Michael Bentley has put it, the full-bodied attack on protectionism ‘removed the need to think’.⁴¹ Such Liberal humour was widespread and, critically, one-sided; the corpus shows that the traditionally more sober Liberals were noted by newspapers as evoking ‘laughter’ from grassroots audiences in and outside East Anglia in 1906 more than twice as often as their opponents.

It seemed that the Liberals had discovered a simple populism that enabled them to exploit, rather than hide from, the mass electorate’s appetite for the politics of passion. By contrast, the Unionists were now lumbered with the more counter-intuitive appeal running against the zeitgeist. With the addition of free trade (with its important implications of material well-being) the argument that had begun as ‘sane imperialism’ in 1900 was transformed, and the Liberals found it much easier to cast themselves confidently as the patriotic defenders of British workmen. Although they developed a more punchy and dynamic popular appeal, the real Liberal success in 1906 arguably lay not in matching the Unionists as imperialists, but in successfully differentiating love of country from love of empire. By doing so, the Liberals were able to cast the Unionists as a destabilising and dangerous political force precisely because they were so ideologically obsessed with imperialism through their crusade for imperial preference and were

prepared to sacrifice cheap bread at home for a political project abroad.

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The 1906 campaign perhaps demonstrated that the Liberals had been too afraid of popular imperialism. The issue was not consistently central in late-Victorian and Edwardian elections, and, even if it did dominate a given campaign, this did not mean Liberals were condemned to lose. However, there is no doubt that the defeat in 1900 was extremely traumatic for the party, principally because it damaged their traditional faith in elections as exercises in public intellect. By repackaging the electoral albatross of ‘sane imperialism’ in patriotic wrapping in 1906, the Liberals were able to match the Conservatives as promoters of simple and populist electoral appeals, and thus leave behind the highbrow but incoherent platform of the 1890s. In this sense, the traumatic loss not only helped propel the party towards a more electorally dynamic new Liberalism, but also allowed it to slam the door on their sentimental mid-Victorian ideal of high-minded electoral debate with a considered ‘rational’ voter at its centre. Elections were becoming exceptionally partisan and ruthless, and the claim that the Unionists were sentencing the poor to starvation in 1906 was arguably no less of a smear than the Tory allegation that ‘pro-Boer’ Liberals had been in traitors in 1900. The Liberals had now learned to ‘fight dirty’, something that would serve them well in elections in the years that followed as the political temperature reached boiling point over the ‘Peers vs the People’ crisis. ■

Luke Blaxill is a lecturer in Modern British History at Hertford College, University of Oxford. He is particularly interested in the history of electoral politics. His first book, *The War of Words: the Language of British Elections 1880–1914* was published by the Royal Historical Society in 2020. He makes regular appearances on Radio 4’s *The Long View*, *Talk TV*, *5 News*, *France 24*, documentaries, and in other media. Email: luke.blaxill@history.ox.ac.uk

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Manifestos

Richard Toye analyses Liberal manifestos to trace the party's beliefs about the British empire/commonwealth, colonialism and decolonisation

Liberal Party, Empire and Commonwealth, 1900–1979: A perspective through election manifestos

WHAT WAS THE Liberal Party's vision of empire? How much did Liberals care about the issue? These are significant questions because they have the potential to cast light on the centrality, or otherwise, of imperial concerns in British politics and society more generally. This article uses Liberal manifestos to trace the party's beliefs about the British empire/commonwealth, colonialism, and decolonisation, from 1900 through to 1979. As would be expected, the theme of empire was dominant at the start of the period – in connection with debates about South Africa and free trade – and declined thereafter. The 1920s saw a flurry of interest in colonial development. Post-1945, the party sought to claim credit for the transformation of empire into commonwealth, made early demands for a British turn to Europe, and showed pioneering concern about racial discrimination. By the 1970s, the discourse of empire/commonwealth had been reformulated into post-colonial debates over race

relations and immigration. The commonwealth ceased to be discussed in any meaningful way as a significant geopolitical entity.

There has been longstanding historical controversy between scholars who argue for the importance of popular imperialism, and those who claim that the British people were rather uninterested in empire.¹ These debates always had a political edge, not least because of the idea that, never having properly processed its loss of status or engaged with the realities of its past, Britain is still gripped by a form of neurosis. Paul Gilroy has labelled this 'post-colonial melancholia'.² The issue has come to greater prominence due to public and academic arguments over the significance of Brexit, which is entangled with the longer story of the decline or reformulation of 'Britishness'.³ As Robert Saunders has pointed out, claims that supporters of the Leave campaign were motivated by imperial nostalgia are often made in an overly simplistic way. Yet at the same time, he rightly suggests, 'post-imperial

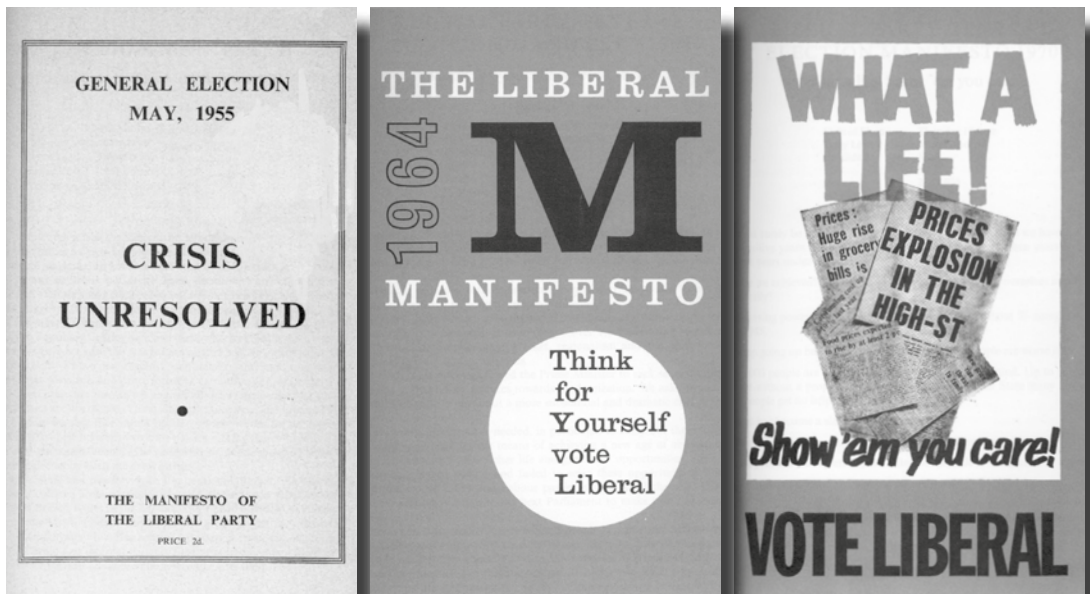
patterns of thought’ should be regarded ‘not as a psychological affliction to which only half the population is subject, but as a common cultural inheritance through which all sides think and argue.’⁴ The question remains, however, whether all groups in society have been equally prone to imperial/post-imperial thought, and whether there have been genuine moments of escape from, or rebellion against, its constraints. Have there, indeed, been moments when its importance genuinely faded?

An examination of the Liberal Party’s electoral promises over the first seven decades of the twentieth century can help illuminate these questions. This is in spite of the fact that Britain’s last exclusively Liberal government came to an end, with the formation of the Asquith coalition, in 1915. Although the party’s decline was real and drastic, the Liberals continued to have moments of real political salience and apparent revival. As Peter Sloman has recently written, ‘The re-emergence of the Liberal Party as a significant electoral force was one of the most important

political developments in 1970s Britain’ – this being achieved on the back of a critique of class politics and the unresponsiveness of the two-party system to citizens’ problems.⁵ Yet even for those many stretches during which Liberal electoral prospects seemed hopeless, the views put forward by an embattled minor party can be used to cast light on the broader political landscape. Though the Liberals lacked the opportunity to enact their policies, their manifestos cast light on what was thought to be politically sayable and potentially popular.

To understand what manifestos can tell us about imperial issues requires an appreciation of the genre and how it changed over time.⁶ These documents had their origins in the election addresses – or personal constituency manifestos – of party leaders. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was an established convention that a leader’s address, notionally addressed to his constituents, was a guide to his party’s national policy, even though individual candidates retained a good deal of freedom of manoeuvre. Up to and including 1918, Liberal general election manifestos

Liberal Party election manifestos: 1955, 1964, 1970



often, but not always, took this form. Thereafter, the party consistently issued its own manifestos in a style that would be recognisable today – except in 1929, when David Lloyd George's address to the electors of Caernarvon

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Boroughs was taken as the authoritative party statement. Over time, these documents tended to become longer and more detailed (as did those of the other parties), though the upward trend was not entirely consistent. Thus, the 1900 Liberal manifesto consisted of 1,790 words and the 1979 one of 7,061 words. This expansion had implications for the audience and purpose of manifestos.

Manifestos have a reputation as documents that are 'unread, and often unreadable'. By the time that Lord Hailsham made that comment, in 1976, it was likely fair.⁷ Earlier in the century, however, they achieved wide circulation. It is plausible to imagine that the relatively short and punchy addresses-cum-manifestos of the Edwardian era, which were often reproduced in newspapers, achieved a substantial readership. During that period, party leaders were largely content to lay out general principles, leaving detailed policymaking for when they were in office. But as time progressed, and partly in response to the challenge of Labour, parties were increasingly expected to provide lists of specific pledges, as well as to explain how they would be paid for. As manifestos lengthened to give evidence of policy planning, they were less likely to be perused by ordinary voters. But they were still important because of their agenda-setting function and because of the way that they were discussed in the media. 'A party's manifesto, however little it is read, is always a crucial political

document', explained one leading journalist in 1974. 'It defines the party's very being and purpose, fixing the analysis of problems, listing the pledges, enumerating the priorities which are repeated in a thousand candidates' speeches across the country.'⁸ Arguably, as the post-1929 Liberals stood little chance of forming a government, they had a little more

leeway than Labour and the Conservatives, because their plans were less likely to receive searching scrutiny.

One somewhat crude way of measuring imperial language in manifestos is simply to count the occurrence of specific terms. For this purpose, the following words were designated the 'empire word-group': empire, imperial(ism/ists), colony, colonies, colonial(ism), dominion(s). The word 'commonwealth' was counted separately. The limitations of this approach should be noted. First, allowance must be made for the changing length of manifestos across time. Second, there is some scope for the data to mislead, as with a few uses of 'commonwealth' that do not refer to the (post-) imperial institution, but this is marginal. Third, the use of the words in question does not necessarily mean that parties favoured empire – sometimes, for example, parties referred to 'colonialism' in order to attack it. Fourth, the data does not capture references to specific territories (e.g. India) or imperial issues (e.g. tariff reform).

The numbers do, however, offer a starting point for considering the relative tendencies of the various parties to discuss these questions and gives some insight into their favoured terminologies. Uses by each party of the entire empire/commonwealth word group is shown in Figure 1. The detailed data is available upon request. Taking all the 1900–1979 manifestos together, the Liberals were the party which made the fewest uses of the empire/

commonwealth word group, and the Conservatives the most (with more uses than both other parties put together). 1900 and 1906 were the only elections at which the Liberals outdid both the Conservatives and Labour in this respect, although their lead over the Tories was trivial. The Liberals did quite often outmatch Labour, notably in 1945, 1950, and 1951, but Labour's prolific use of 'commonwealth' in the 1960s contributed to its significant overall lead over them.

'Commonwealth', it should be noted, enjoyed a mid-century boom across all three parties but faded during the 1970s. Over the whole period, the Liberals were significantly less likely than their rivals to use the term, though they achieved the highest 'commonwealth' count on one occasion (the election of 1951). It will be clear, then, that there were considerable ups and downs in occurrences of the empire/commonwealth word group. To explain this, we need to look at the various elections in more detail.

For the Liberals, the poll of 1900 was not much more than an exercise in damage limitation. The South African (or Second Boer) War had started the previous year with a series of British reverses but, now that the military situation had improved, Lord Salisbury's Unionist government sought to profit by calling a 'khaki' election. Conservatives and their Liberal Unionist allies painted the Liberals as unpatriotic, unmanly, and even treacherous.⁹ The Liberals' task was made harder by the sharp divisions within their party, between 'Liberal Imperialists' who supported the war and 'pro-Boers' who opposed it. As party leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman faced the unenviable task of trying to keep the factions together under the onslaught of jingoistic attacks. It should be noted that pro-Boers, such as Lloyd George, were not in general hostile to the empire as such – they simply believed that this particular imperial conflict was misconceived.¹⁰ The Liberals had

a long record of attacking Tory 'imperialism', which they associated with an autocratic style of government, and presented themselves as the custodians of an empire based on morality and freedom rather than on mere selfish national interest.¹¹

The National Liberal Federation published an election manifesto, the rhetoric of which was in line with the heritage of Gladstone. It accused the government of imperial and foreign policy mismanagement and of failing to understand Britain's true national mission. The overall message could be summed up as 'The empire is not safe in the government's hands.' The manifesto foregrounded imperial issues strongly – it made no attempt to sidestep the South African question. 'The Nation will not soon forget the dark days of less than a year ago following the miscalculation of a Government that had risked a war without first counting the cost.' As a result of ministers' incompetence, Britain had been humiliated, the manifesto claimed. 'Disasters in the field fell like thunderclaps upon our country and overwhelmed it with shame, apprehension, and distress.' If the position had now recovered, this was due not to the actions of the government but rather to 'the genius of Lord Roberts' (the British commander in South Africa) and the courage of his soldiers. Coming from the Liberal side, this praise of the military probably sounded rather unconvincing, but it was necessary in order to deny any credit to those who were directing the war on the civilian side.¹²

The manifesto also denounced a panoply of alleged failures elsewhere around the world. In some cases, it accused the government of being unnecessarily provocative (triggering conflict on the Indian frontier, for example). In other ones, it alleged feebleness: 'In Siam, Tunis, and Madagascar British interests were gratuitously sacrificed by a series of what were called "graceful concessions".' It further denounced Unionist neglect of social

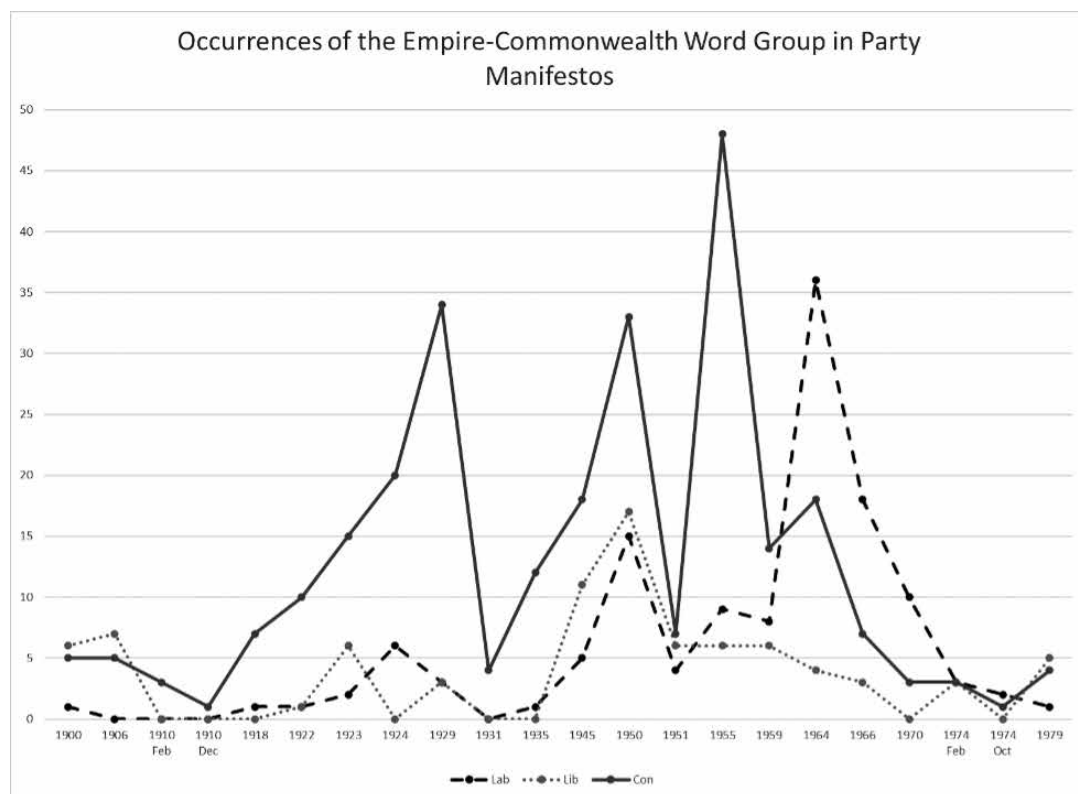


Figure 1. Note that the 1918 Conservative figure refers to the Lloyd George coalition manifesto, and that figures for the post-1931 'National' Liberal group are not shown.

issues, but though the manifesto was spirited in its criticisms, it could scarcely disguise the fundamental split in the Liberals' own ranks. It offered a slight desperate plea to the competing factions to sink their differences: 'Shall we not all unite in condemnation of a Ministry which, for the five years of its existence, has kept the Empire in a ferment, has squandered its resources, and in legislation and administration has shown neither the will nor the power to pursue or to initiate a policy of progress and reform?'¹³

By the time of the next election, in 1906, the party had achieved much greater harmony. A major cause of this was Joseph Chamberlain's decision to launch a campaign for imperial protectionism, or 'tariff reform'. This split the Unionists, raised the spectre of 'food taxes', and allowed Liberals to coalesce

around their traditional cause of free trade, which was strongly embedded in British culture.¹⁴ At the time of the election, Campbell-Bannerman was already prime minister, Arthur Balfour's government having resigned at the end of the previous year. In his election address, which on this occasion served as the party's manifesto too, 'C-B' continued the critique offered in 1900. He accused the Unionists of mishandling the aftermath of the Boer War and criticised the use of Chinese indentured labour in South Africa – attacks on 'Chinese slavery' were a popular Liberal election cry. He also dedicated considerable space to free trade. A key Chamberlainite argument was that tariff reform would allow empire countries to favour each other's trade through a mutually beneficial system of concessions (or 'imperial preference').

Campbell-Bannerman rejected the claim that this would bolster imperial unity:

I hold that any attempt to rivet together the component parts of the Empire with bonds so forged, or to involve it with us in a Fiscal war against the world, is not, and cannot come to, good. An empire 'united' on a basis of food taxes would be an empire with a disruptive force at its centre, and that is a prospect with the realisation of which, both in the interests of the Colonies and the mother-country, I can have nothing to do.¹⁵

As this suggests, though the Liberals may have been less emotionally attached to the empire than Conservatives were, they still wanted to present themselves as its custodians. Far from wanting to dissolve it, they argued that artificial attempts to strengthen imperial ties at the expense of the people at home and in the empire, would be counterproductive.

H. H. Asquith replaced Campbell-Bannerman as prime minister in 1908. He was much less inclined than his predecessor to use election addresses/manifestos to discourse on imperial matters (though his support, in 1918, for reform in India should be noted).¹⁶ This was so even though international trade remained an important issue and though anti-colonial resistance surged in Egypt, Ireland and India after the First World War. It was not that Asquith and his colleagues did not care about empire questions or that they remained silent about them in general. But they did not use manifestos to foreground them as central questions in the electoral fight.

In 1923, the Conservatives sought a mandate for protection, inadvertently triggering reconciliation between the Asquith and Lloyd George Liberal groupings that had split from one another during the war. But though free trade was still common ground for both, the reunited party's manifesto arguments for it made no reference to the threat that tariff

reform might pose to the empire. The party was now being progressively outstripped by Labour, which formed its first (minority) government in 1924. By talking little about the empire in its manifestos, the Liberals were behaving more like their socialist rivals than like the Conservatives, whose 1920s manifestos saw a significant increase in the use of imperial language.

What little the Liberal manifestos did say was interesting, nonetheless. There was some novel reference to imperial development. This must be understood in two different contexts. First, the need to find a solution to the problem of mass unemployment. Second, the shifting discourse of colonial development more broadly. As Aram Ziai notes, 'in a long and discontinuous process during the first half of the 20th century, the idea gained prominence that developing a colony had to be linked with material improvements for the indigenous population'.¹⁷ This type of development helped provide a rhetorical justification for empire at a time when it was increasingly threatened by nationalist movements.

The concept first appeared in the 1923 manifesto, which argued for government support of 'enterprises that would permanently improve and develop the home country and the Empire'. In addition to domestic initiatives such as such as afforestation and land drainage of land, there was mention of 'the development of Imperial resources especially in our Crown Colonies, railway building in the Dominions and India, the facilitation of over-sea settlement under the British flag, [and] cheapening the means of transport in order to develop inter-imperial trade'.¹⁸ Briefer references occurred in 1924 and 1929.¹⁹

A more detailed idea of what was intended can be gleaned from the 1928 policy document *Britain's Industrial Future* (or 'Yellow Book'). This substantial volume, produced after Lloyd George had seized the party leadership, was the culmination of a shift away from

classical Liberalism and towards economic interventionism.²⁰ The Yellow Book included a chapter on 'Imperial Development'. This expressed caution about the expansion of empire trade, making clear that this could not be expected to solve all of Britain's economic problems.

These considerations do not, however, alter the fact that the Empire presents opportunities for development of vast potentiality, which it is both our duty and our interest to utilise to the utmost of our power. No policy of national revival would be other than incomplete if it did not give a high place to this task; a task which is peculiarly incumbent upon Liberals, seeing that the Liberal Party may justly claim to have been responsible for the most important stages in the development of the Empire's modern form, as a commonwealth of co-operating peoples.

The chapter sought to refute the idea that Liberalism was indifferent to the empire's well-being and promoted the idea that Britain's colonial rule was a form of trusteeship exercised on behalf of 'simple and primitive peoples'.²¹ Although the radicalism of the Yellow Book's economic vision provoked discontent amongst traditional Gladstonian Liberals, of whom there were still many, these bland imperial sentiments were likely acceptable across all wings of the rapidly fracturing party.²²

During the course of 1931, with even free trade now being a point of contention, the party split in three. Two groupings – the Simonites and the Samuelites – joined the Conservative-dominated National Government, and Lloyd George's small group remained outside. When an election took place in the autumn, Lloyd George's address referred to 'the imperial Parliament' but made no direct substantive comment on empire affairs.²³ Sir John Simon's letter to his constituents, which

served as his Liberal National group's manifesto, also steered clear of discussing them explicitly, though it argued in favour of tariffs.²⁴ Only the manifesto of Sir Herbert Samuel's group made overtly imperial arguments. It claimed that 'freedom of trade is the only permanent basis for our economic prosperity and for the welfare of the Empire and of the world.' It also argued for 'The development of responsible government in India' via the Round Table Conference which had been initiated by the Labour government in 1930.²⁵ The Samuelites left the National Government in 1932, because of their opposition to the Ottawa agreements, which marked a decisive breach with Britain's free trade past. Their 1935 manifesto included none of the terms from the empire/commonwealth word group, and instead highlighted the need to strengthen the League of Nations, in the context of Mussolini's recent invasion of Abyssinia.²⁶

By the time of the 1945 election, the National group of Liberals had effectively been co-opted by the Conservatives. The remainder of the Liberals, now under Sir Archibald Sinclair, held misplaced hopes for electoral success, despite fielding only 306 candidates. Sinclair fought a rather traditional campaign and was overshadowed by Sir William Beveridge, who had been elected as a Liberal MP in the wake of his famous wartime report on social services. The party's manifesto has been described as 'probably the most left-wing on which it campaigned in the whole of the twentieth century.'²⁷ In this context, it is striking how prominent imperial issues were in the document (though this did not translate into local campaigning, assuming that individual election addresses were representative of this). The manifesto was cast as a twenty-point programme, with 'The British Commonwealth' appearing second on the list, above 'Service Men and Women', 'Social Security', 'Full Employment', and 'Housing' (points 3 through 6). It argued:

The Liberal principle which inspired the creation of the Commonwealth – that of free and independent nations working together in a common loyalty for a common way of life – must be fostered as an element of stability in the world and a practical example of the way in which security can be combined with national freedom.²⁸

Liberals and others had been using the term ‘commonwealth’ for decades, as a synonym for empire which lacked the connotations of domination.²⁹ And the manifesto did not drop ‘empire’ entirely. Nevertheless, there was now a greater emphasis on ‘commonwealth’ and the spirit of free association it was said to represent. At the same time, there was a return to discussion of colonial development and trusteeship, now paired with the encouragement of ‘political self-government in association with the Commonwealth’. This was the first suggestion in a Liberal manifesto of political reform in any territory other than India. There was also now a proposal ‘for complete self-government for India’ – a much stronger suggestion than the various vague hints of change in previous manifestos.³⁰

The disastrous electoral performance in 1945 confirmed the Liberals as a fringe party rather than as a serious contender for government.³¹ At the 1950 election, under the leadership of Clement Davies, the party tried to take credit for having inspired the ongoing transformation of empire into commonwealth and welcomed the newfound independence of India, Pakistan and Ceylon. However, the manifesto also sounded a note of caution: ‘Self-government must only be granted to Colonies when in the interests of the majority of the people concerned. [...] Even then, colonial economic independence is unlikely.’³² In 1951, with the Cold War

well in train, the manifesto insisted that ‘One of the greatest forces for peace is the British Commonwealth.’ There was, moreover, now some acknowledgement of the fact of racial injustice. ‘Liberals are proud of the Commonwealth. They wholly condemn the colour bar which exists in parts of it.’³³ Race discrimination had long existed within the empire, of course, and some Liberals had shown concern about it, but the issue had gained greater prominence with the establishment of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1948.

This period saw the emergence of European cooperation and integration as a theme in Liberal manifestos. That of 1950 pressed for faster development of the recently founded Council of Europe but also insisted that there was no need for Britain to choose between Europe and the commonwealth.³⁴ Similar sentiments were to be found in the other manifestos of the fifties: united Europe, the commonwealth, and the UN were to be mutually reinforcing. Jo Grimond took over as leader in 1957, and the party began a partial recovery. Five years later, at the time of Britain’s first, failed application to join the European Economic Community (EEC), the Liberal Assembly hardened its pro-European line. The commonwealth was not to have a

Similar sentiments were to be found in the other manifestos of the fifties: united Europe, the commonwealth, and the UN were to be mutually reinforcing.

veto over UK membership of the EEC.³⁵ In the 1964 manifesto, it was insisted that Britain had a special role to play in commonwealth development. But the commonwealth now appeared in a new context too. By this point popular fears about immigration had led the Tory government to introduce restrictions. The Liberals now said that they would ‘take the initiative in setting up a system

of commonwealth consultation towards an agreed policy for immigration, exclusion and expulsion and the rights of political asylum.³⁶ This seems like an attempt to address the issue without appearing racist or coercive.

In the 1966 manifesto, there was a specific section headed 'Non-Racialist Approach to Immigration', separate from that on the commonwealth. (The latter section deprecated 'compromises with racialism'). It spoke highly of immigrants' contributions to the country, but also suggested that there would be immigration control, albeit 'regulated by the availability of jobs or the possession of skills and not fixed at an arbitrary figure bearing no relation to vacancies.'³⁷ Jeremy Thorpe became party leader in 1967. He was vocal in denouncing the white minority regime in Rhodesia, in a way that was consistent with the Liberal humanitarian tradition.³⁸ He attacked apartheid and criticised the Labour government's ambiguous line on the Vietnam War. Moreover, his progressive approach to immigration, together with David Steel's pioneering role in legalising abortion, meant that 'in the social and cultural sphere, the party was associated with the "permissive" agenda'.³⁹

Tensions over this came into the open in the wake of Enoch Powell's 1968 'rivers of blood' speech. In an unscripted party-political broadcast, the leader of Birmingham City Council's Liberal group, Wallace Lawler, appeared to contradict the official Liberal line on immigration. Lawler may not have been as extreme as Powell – he had campaigned for Sikh bus drivers to be allowed to wear turbans – but he wanted to exclude most groups of migrants from moving to his city.⁴⁰ His tough line may help explain his narrow victory in the 1969 Ladywood parliamentary byelection (he lost the seat the following year). Local and national liberalism could deliver very different messages.

The 1970 manifesto backed the UN, NATO, and British membership of the EEC. It urged American withdrawal from Vietnam as soon as possible and regretted the recent US invasion of Cambodia. The commonwealth was not mentioned. Traditional free trade beliefs now merged with anti-racism and concern for the economic development of poor nations but without any use of imperial or post-imperial terminology of the kind that had previously been associated with these issues. Hence, 'Greater freedom in international trade will assist the underdeveloped countries who need markets for their products. [...] Britain and other countries should contribute 1 per cent of Gross National Product of official aid to developing countries as soon as possible. We are totally opposed to all forms of racial and religious discrimination.'⁴¹

In the three further Liberal manifestos of the '70s, there was little evidence that the commonwealth was thought to hold geopolitical significance, though there was some sense of historically derived duty towards it and of a distinctive relationship. Commonwealth countries were thus not considered entirely 'foreign'. The February 1974 manifesto stated the party's belief that Britain had a 'primary obligation to citizens of the United Kingdom and colonies', as well as to commonwealth citizens whose right to register as UK citizens after five years' residence had been removed by the 1971 Immigration Act. The manifesto called for that right to be reinstated and for a royal commission to 'examine and clarify' the rights of UK and commonwealth citizens.⁴² The October 1974 manifesto was silent on commonwealth issues but in 1979, under the leadership of David Steel, the party suggested that Britain had a special contribution to make to Third World development 'because of our links with the Commonwealth'.⁴³ Subsequent Alliance/Liberal Democrat manifestos made only a few notional references to the

commonwealth. The theme was now dead as an area of substantive policy discussion.

In conclusion, manifestos were, of course, only one part of the picture. Were one to make a review of other types of election literature, as well as speeches, press conferences, and interviews, it is likely that a more complex story would emerge. Such an exercise would undoubtedly reveal considerable diversity between different localities and candidates (as the discussion above of Birmingham suggests). Nevertheless, as authoritative, even definitive, statements of the party's national policy, manifestos offer an excellent method for tracking change across time. This article has traced not merely the decline of the empire/commonwealth as an electoral theme but also some notable alterations in the ways in which the issues were formulated.

It is clear that, at the start of the period, traditional Tory claims about the Liberal Party were inaccurate. Liberals were neither indifferent nor hostile to the empire – had they not cared about it, they would hardly have divided so sharply over the South African war. However, they were certainly not as committed to it as Conservatives and Unionists were. For Liberals, it was desirable to maintain the empire, but not at the expense of the welfare of British workers.⁴⁴ This may help explain why a party which was so wretchedly split on so many issues adjusted to the decline and fall of the empire with little obvious sign of pain. Both the Conservative and Labour parties were much more troubled by the switch from commonwealth to Europe, which the Liberals embraced early and with alacrity. Whatever the Liberal Party's faults, excessive imperial nostalgia does not appear to have been one of them. ■

Richard Toye is Professor of Modern History at the University of Exeter. His most recent book is *Age of Hope: Labour, 1945, and the Birth of Modern Britain* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

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Reviews

From rebellion to emancipation

Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* (Vintage, 2021)

Review by Andy Cabot

Michael Taylor's *The Interest* – and its even more pointed subtitle: *How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* – achieves

something quite unique in just about 300 pages: the book provides a comprehensive synthesis of the critical period in the debate on British slavery between the

Demerara rebellion in 1823 and the passing of emancipation in parliament in 1833. Taylor's work is notable for its examination of the era and its key figures, making it

accessible not only to academia but also to a broader readership. For the present reviewer, who also has an academic background in the study of slavery and slave societies, Taylor's ability to produce a work of history that is not only enjoyable but also genuinely engaging is a stark success in itself.

The book has a short preface centred on David Cameron's 2015 visit to Jamaica, one introductory chapter, and eighteen chapters of roughly equal size dealing with the emergence and evolution of the debate on slavery in the British empire from the Slave Trade Act in 1807 to the Abolition Act in 1833. There is an epilogue entitled 'Who Else Must Fall?' dealing with the long-term repercussions of emancipation and contemporary debates about reparations, global racial inequalities, and Britain's imperial past. The edition reviewed here also contains all the author's footnotes placed at the end, a bibliography listing all the key primary sources used, and an index. Finally, there are also two distinct sections in the book of nineteenth-century images and visual materials representing all the major players and locations described in the book.

The book's first two chapters provide a large contextual introduction to the rise of slavery and abolitionism in Britain prior to the campaign for ending slavery that started during the early 1820s. Chapter 3 is where the book's central narrative arc starts in earnest, as it documents the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society before offering a sweeping portrait of the West India Interest in Britain at the start of the emancipation campaign.

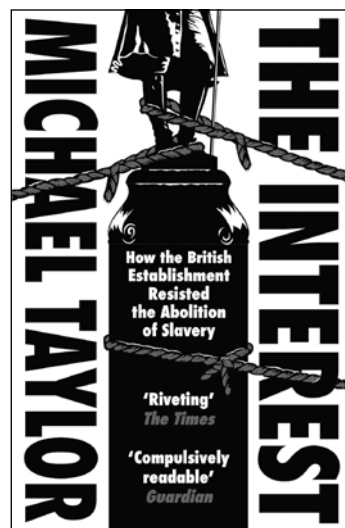
The next four chapters deal with the repercussions of the Demerara rebellion on parliamentary and public debates about slavery, with a particular focus on the deft legislative manoeuvring of Georges Canning as he proposed a series of 'amelioration' resolutions in 1823, ostensibly aimed at ensuring the gradual abolition of slavery in the colonies. However, in reality, these resolutions served to indefinitely postpone the actual 'amelioration' process.

Chapters 8 to 12 highlight the successful resistance mounted by the pro-slavery interest in basically neutralising any advance towards amelioration or emancipation until the final downfall of Wellington's government in late 1830.

Chapters 13 to 15 then review how the Baptist war in Jamaica, in late 1831, and the passing of the Reform Act in 1832 dealt a crucial blow to the pro-slavery establishment, paving the way for the arrival of a Whig majority in the Commons and the all-but-certain passing of an emancipation bill.

Chapters 16 to 18 conclude Taylor's book with the passing of the Abolition Act of 1833, but they cautiously move away from any celebratory interpretation of the Act, instead analysing how the financial compensation awarded to slaveowners and a six-year apprenticeship system imposed on liberated slaves made the British emancipation process a decidedly conservative one.

As its subtitle indicates, Taylor's book also wishes to demonstrate how an organised pro-slavery interest resisted abolition during



this pivotal decade. Placing the history of slave emancipation within the larger history of the British slave economy and empire is one of the author's most important achievements. It complicates the traditional understanding of abolitionism as a cultural and political movement based on 'Moral Capital' – to borrow from the title of Christopher Leslie Brown's important book published in 2006. Instead, it follows the influential research initiated by scholars like David Beck Ryden, Nicholas Draper or Catherine Hall, which explores the individuals and groups who directly profited from the slave economy. The decision to draw from this specific research guides Taylor's narrative of emancipation.

Although it dwells on historical debates and events, the book also relies on a gallery of individuals for its story. And if the actions of antislavery parliamentary leaders like Thomas Fowell Buxton and government figures like George Canning or Charles Grey do take centre stage, there

is more than enough space for less familiar faces who nevertheless played a significant part in the debates around emancipation: the examples of Edward Jordon, the free black journalist from Kingston who 'founded the *Watchman* newspaper to expose the misdeeds of the plantocracy' (p. 193), or of Elizabeth Heyrick's determined campaign against West Indian sugar in 1825, come to mind. All these various members of the British antislavery movement receive their deserved recognition, as they helped reinforce the broader parliamentary fight against slavery.

Some of the major arguments proposed in the book are illuminating. This is particularly true when it examines the career of Alexander McDonnell. Originally an Irish-born merchant and colonist, McDonnell turned secretary to the West India Merchants in 1820 and produced perhaps the strongest case for the superiority of slave labour over free labour in his *Considerations on Negro Slavery*. While quoting some of McDonnell's main arguments in favour of the plantation economy's benefits, the author connects together these pro-imperial views on tariffs, duties and mercantile restrictions as part of a larger 'conservative economics' that 'were really pro-slavery economics' and which 'constructed one of the earliest and most cogent British cases for protectionism' (p. 134). This and the other numerous developments offered throughout the text on the actions of leading Tory statesmen concerning slavery shed a much-needed light on

how British West Indians managed to put the preservation of slavery at the centre of the post-Napoleonic conservative consensus in Britain. In other words, and to borrow from the author's more provocative formulation, slavery had been central to British identity and 'national life' until 1833 'as much as the Church of England, the monarchy, or the liberties granted by the Glorious Revolution' (p. 275).

Since it develops a historical narrative largely devoted to the post-1823 period, some of Taylor's arguments tend to downplay the existence of pre-existing trends on certain occasions. In one of the concluding remarks of Chapter 14 dealing with the aftermath of the Baptist war, the author states that the 'Jamaica Rebellion of 1831 and its aftermath now persuaded Whig ministers that slavery itself was the root cause of the violence' (p. 231) to underscore the fact that slave rebellions played a decisive role on the road to emancipation in Britain. If domestic reactions to large slave revolts were far from positive before 1831, this conclusion seems to brush off the boost given to British abolitionism during the Haitian War of Independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century which was instrumental in bringing about the slave-trade abolition in 1807.

As for the reader's experience, I did find it peculiar to find a rather frequent use of historical anecdotes about political figures like Lord Liverpool or William Huskisson. These did not in any way damage the many persuasive and important arguments laid out in the book. Yet,

as a general observation, I found it more enjoyable to learn about the little-known antislavery pamphlet by Henry Whitely, *Three Months in Jamaica*, or the formation of the central negro emancipation committee in 1834 under the supervision of former 'apprentice' James Williams, than about the horrific train accident suffered by William Huskisson in 1830.

Apart from these minor criticisms, Michael Taylor's *The Interest* stands out as an impressive work of history. It will satisfy readers who are looking to learn about the impact of slavery on British society in the nineteenth century and today. Additionally, the book will also be an important contribution to ongoing research on the weight of the slave economy in nineteenth-century Britain and its lasting effects. It will also be valuable to researchers working on the relationship between slavery and empire in nineteenth-century Britain, as well as those interested in the diverse facets of the abolitionist movement in Britain during the same period.

I highly recommend this book for all historians interested in these themes, and for all readers wishing to understand the importance of slavery in British history. ■

Andy Cabot is a History PhD from Université Paris Cité in France. He defended his thesis, entitled 'Slavery, empires and diplomacy (France, Britain and the United States): abolishing or consolidating slavery in the Atlantic world after Saint-Domingue? (c. 1791 – c. 1815)', in 2021. The work was awarded the thesis prize from the Foundation for the Remembrance of Slavery in France in 2022.

Violent Empire?

Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (Bodley Head, 2022)

Review by William Wallace

This 680-page book presents the case for the prosecution against those who defend the British empire as a civilising project of which current generations can be proud. In careful detail Caroline Elkins – a Harvard history professor who made her name with a highly critical study of Britain's suppression of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, drawing on rediscovered archives – sets out the contradictions between the liberal rhetoric about England's 'civilising mission' and the systemic violence which established and maintained imperial rule.

Liberals will be most focused on the opening chapters, which examine the origins and the contradictions of the concept of liberal imperialism. Starting from Edmund Burke's speeches setting out the charges to impeach Warren Hastings, and the determined efforts of supporters of the East India Company to defend their record of conquest and rule against Burke and others, she traces the development of liberal imperialism through the writings of both James and John Stuart Mill (both of whom were employed by the East India Company) to its full exposition in the 1880s and 1890s. Tories did not feel the need to justify empire; Liberals, to the disgust of critics like James Stephen, reconciled their doubts by committing themselves to bringing these backward races slowly towards civilisation. 'Liberal imperialism was an oxymoron ... reformist

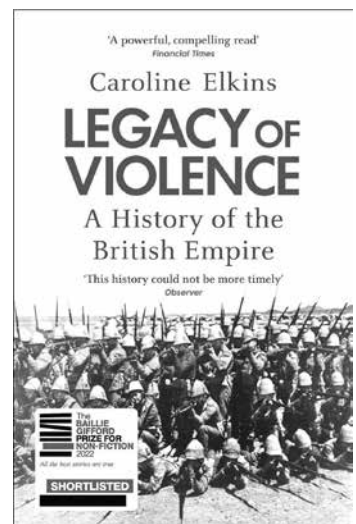
and coercive.' It offered the distant promise of liberty, in return for the immediate necessity of despotism. There was, Elkins notes, often 'a vocal minority' which objected to the violence embedded in imperial rule; but they were crowded out by appeals to patriotism and British exceptionalism. Civilisation and the rule of law were brought to these 'backward' peoples through sustained force.

The Boer War brought these contradictions to the heart of domestic debate. Pro-Boers like Lloyd George were hounded in the press and the street, while Afrikaners were labelled an inferior race and herded into concentration camps. Yet by the time Lloyd George became prime minister he had become a full-throated imperialist, justifying the 'moral force' of violence in Ireland and Egypt.

The next 450 pages take the story through the twentieth century, from the First World War to the end of the 1960s – from justifications of the Amritsar massacre, through 'air control' tactics in Iraq, to Palestine, the end of empire in South Asia, the Malayan emergency, Kenya and Cyprus. The links between British behaviour in Ireland and elsewhere are traced through the careers of military and civil officers whose careers took them across the world and back – from the Boer War to the bitter struggle in Ireland between 1916 and 1921, from there to the Middle

East and India, and for their successors from Cyprus and south-east Asia back to the streets of Belfast after 1969.

The last two chapters examine the legacy of empire and the continuing battle over its portrayal. Professor Elkins has herself engaged with the former Mau Maus' claim for compensation from the British government and debated on television with Nigel Farage. She sharply criticises historians like Niall Ferguson, Andrew Roberts and Nigel Biggar, and the efforts that Michael Gove took with their support to promote a more 'patriotic' history in English schools. Now that the empire has 'come home' in the form of immigration from the 'new commonwealth', portrayal of Britain's imperial history has become a conflict over national identity, attitudes towards minorities, and Britain's place in the world.



This makes for uncomfortable reading for British Liberals, however much we see ourselves as forming part of the 'vocal minority' who challenged at least part of the violence embedded in imperial rule. Some may consider the absence of any comparison with the record of other 'civilising' empires to imply that Britain was an exceptionally brutal imperial power. France, with its '*mission civilatrice*' (and its brutal war in Algeria and tragic legacy in Indochina) is the most directly comparable; the USA, with its rhetoric of anti-imperialism and of 'making the world safe for democracy' – undermined by its record in the Philippines and in Central America,

and by its treatment of Amerindians and former slaves within its own expanding territories – has been as hypocritical as the UK. Elkins' interpretation of the 1941 Atlantic Charter as a set of principles which Roosevelt believed in, but its British drafters did not, seems unbalanced. Peter Ricketts's account of its negotiation (in *Hard Choices*, 2021) concludes that both sides agreed its heady rhetoric without thinking through its implications for their own policies.

Liberal empire, the book insists, has been a contradiction in terms. That has been the British experience, but also the French and American. The Anglo-American invasion of

Iraq was, Professor Elkins remarks, a further surge of the exceptionalist myth that order and progress could be imposed on other cultures through violence. Whether the British, or French or American, legacy of empire is any better than the Belgian, Dutch, Russian or Turkish remains for other historians to contest. ■

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) is a member of the *Journal of Liberal History*'s editorial board. He has taught at Manchester University, Oxford and the LSE, and has researched and published on British foreign policy, national identity and European international politics. He is currently Liberal Democrat Cabinet Office spokesman in the Lords.

Empire, slavery and trade

Christopher Taylor, *Empire of Neglect: The West Indies in the Wake of British Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2018)

Review by Iain Sharpe

'O hear a suffering planter's cry, who groans against free trade; And do believe him when he says, no sugar can be made.'

Thus began 'The Planter's Lament', written by the now long-forgotten author Cyril Francis Perkins from the viewpoint of West Indian sugar planters in the wake of the 1846 Sugar Duties Act. Introduced by Whig Prime Minister Lord John Russell, this piece of legislation abolished preferential tariffs on sugar imported to Britain from the West Indies. In a stroke this reduced their importance to the British economy and led to the sense of imperial

neglect that is the subject of this book. In many ways this free trade measure, rather than the more widely known abolition of slavery in 1834, was the seminal event in the history of Britain's Caribbean empire in the nineteenth century.

While the word 'empire', for good reason, conjures up notions of power, conquest and domination, deeper study of British imperialism brings us up against alternative currents. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this included concepts such as 'informal empire', 'trusteeship' and 'indirect rule'. In this earlier period, for the century after Adam Smith

argued in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that Britain should divest itself of colonies, there was a distinct liberal sentiment in British politics that opposed imperial expansion, even if this did not stop the acquisition of new territories.

Dr Taylor's book highlights how this liberalising agenda drove at least some of the empire's subjects in the West Indies to a feeling of being abandoned by the imperial government. The author acknowledges that an expectation, when embarking on this study, of finding emerging independence movements in the Caribbean during this period gave way to a realisation

that what many craved was more attention and sympathy from the metropolitan government. The book therefore looks at responses to this perceived neglect and how at least some looked to the Americas as a counterpoint to a sense of being abandoned by Britain.

Dr Taylor is a professor of English, and this is a literary rather than political study, involving a close reading of a range of texts, from a widowed eighteenth-century planter's correspondence through early novels by authors based in the West Indies to the more famous autobiography of Mary Seacole which recounted her experiences in, first, Panama and then the Crimean War. Such an approach has the advantage of recovering forgotten voices, although it does leave open the question of how representative of wider opinion these writers of letters, articles, novels and memoirs were.

Nonetheless the examples offered provide interesting perspectives. The plantation owner attempts to compensate for relative powerlessness in selling her sugar in British markets by trying to imbue in her London-based agent a sense of shared enterprise and obligation. In the wake of the Sugar Duties Act, a white absentee planter argues that the abolition of slavery should have required the retention of protection to give Britain's West Indian empire a chance of economic prosperity. He highlighted the irony that Britons now bought cheap slave-grown sugar from Cuba and Brazil and sought to shock the government in London into a more constructive approach by predicting the absorption of the West

Indies into a United States that would reimpose slavery.

In contrast, two of Dr Taylor's subjects see a positive alternative to Britain's imperial neglect. In his novel *Emmanuel Appadocca*, the author Michel Maxwell Philip, himself the son of a black mother and a white planter, channelled his experience of paternal abandonment to write a tale of a mixed-race son's turn to piracy in order to take revenge on the white father who disowned him. Philip portrayed the protagonist as finding a more beneficent environment in Venezuela than in the British West Indies. Also highlighted is the case of the journalist George Des Sources, editor of the *Trinidadian* newspaper, who abandoned his home island to attempt to build a socialist colony in Venezuela.

Perhaps one weakness is that the voices of slaves and former slaves are not greatly represented. An exception is the example of James Williams, whose book *Narrative of Events since August 1834* exposed the so-called 'apprenticeship' system whereby former slaves were required to work for a number of years for their former masters, sometimes in worse circumstances since the end of slavery meant that the latter no longer felt any paternalistic duty of care. Williams briefly achieved a degree of celebrity, yet in a cruelly ironic twist his patron, the abolitionist campaigner Joseph Sturge, was soon treating him much like a chattel. Sturge brought Williams to London but complained that the attention he had received and the 'comparatively idle life' he was now living had 'produced an unfavourable effect' that could only



be remedied by being 'compelled to labour for his bread'.

While this volume offers a valuable alternative perspective on liberalism and empire, if a reviewer's prime duty is to advise on whether or not to read the book, I must warn would-be readers it is heavily laden with what I take to be the jargon of literary criticism to the point of being almost wilfully opaque. For example, when Mary Seacole sets up a hotel for wounded officers in the Crimean War after her application to serve as a nurse was rejected, it is rendered as follows: 'Seacole's racial foreclosure from the affective circuitry of imperial citizenship impels her to resume, once again, her career as a hotelier and sutler.' That is not an exception but an all-too-typical representation of the author's prose style. So, while there are rewards to be had in this book, the reader has to work very hard indeed to reap them. ■

Dr Iain Sharpe studied history at Leicester and London Universities, completing a doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party in the Edwardian era. He was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford for thirty years.

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General election 2024

The surprise announcement of the general election for 4 July has meant we have had to delay the Liberal Democrat History Group discussion meeting we were organising for late June.

Against the background of the conflict in Gaza, we had planned a meeting on the topic of: 'Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel and Palestine: background and legacy'. The meeting will be postponed either to late July or to later in the year – keep an eye on the History Group website at www.liberalhistory.org.uk, and our email mailing list (if you're not on the list, you can join via the form at: <http://bit.ly/LDHGemail>).

The summer issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* will also be delayed; publication is anticipated in late July or early August. Normal service will be resumed in September, with the publication of the autumn issue of the *Journal* and a fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton (14–17 September).