

Symptoms of Empire

IN THE COLONIES

What, then, were the circumstances informing the discussion of conflicts in New Zealand, the Sudan and South Africa? By the 1860s, British colonists in Australia—the continent's overwhelming demographic majority—were to varying degrees imbued with feelings of local and regional belonging, colonial and imperial loyalty, transnational settler solidarity, and an embryonic national awareness.¹ These layers of identification were subsumed under a pervasive belief in British racial progress. Though they wavered in relative importance, affinities within and between different groups were interwoven rather than independent. Seeing oneself as, say, British, Australian, and Tasmanian—whatever these terms meant to those claiming them—were not mutually exclusive decisions. They worked through one another. This fluidity is reflected in press reports where, depending on the situation, Australia is referred to in terms of its individual colonies, together as a nation, in tandem with New Zealand as Australasia, or collectively with all the white British settler colonies.²

Although colonists often retained their English, Scottish, Welsh, and, more problematically, Irish, identities, they could also be incorporated under a broader British identity. Migrant Britons might even feel their 'British' ties more acutely on the margins of empire, such that Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians extolled their exemplary Britishness. The farther away from their traditional homes they got, the stronger the need

to cling to their heritage, and to assert and preserve their sense of themselves.³ The often dire circumstances compelling Britons to emigrate saw a marked divergence between often doubtful colonial loyalty to the British Government on the one hand, and an avid attachment to being British on the other.⁴ Beyond the vagaries of imperial politics and legislative contest, a communal sense of Britishness was, as Russell McGregor has argued, the ground on which Australian-ness could be cultivated.⁵

Similarly, British settlers held a resolute belief in the idea of empire. When dispute came it usually did so from a position of allegiance to the broader British community, enhancing a sense of participation in it. It was, in other words, an understanding of their imperial lineage that permitted colonists to critique specific imperial actions and actors.⁶ At all times these moves were discussed, challenged, and publicised in newsprint.

Tensions between the settler colonies and London were frequent, and evident in debates over matters of imperial military funding and defence, interference in immigration laws, and sub-imperialism in the South Pacific. These tensions framed debates during the Waikato, Sudan and South African conflicts. During the second half of the nineteenth century the Imperial Government weighed often bothersome colonial demands against broader strategic imperatives. Throughout the century the Australian colonies were seldom the top priority of British officials. Though Australian colonists could conceive of themselves as unique, when viewed from London they existed amid a welter of other, frequently more pressing concerns.

Grasping the ideological purchase of Britishness also requires understanding the ways that racial thought conditioned ideas of colonial, national, and imperial belonging. There is a clear difference between those—including Aboriginal people—who could theoretically claim the rights of British subjecthood, and those who proclaimed their innate Britishness.⁷ A requisite whiteness marked (and continues to mark) a sense of advantage in Australian society.

As the nineteenth century progressed, this racial coding—whether applied to Britons or the broader category of Anglo-Saxons (including Americans or even other Europeans)—acquired greater potency. Contrary to ideas of its silent presence, British settlers bombastically—if anxiously—pronounced their whiteness as they defined themselves against a range of ‘others’.⁸ This accompanied an observable tendency to link race with stories of origin. Often this meant a strict policing of

colour categories, especially where nativeness could not be presumed. In 1872, the visiting future MP, George Smyth Baden-Powell, brother of South African War hero and Boy Scout founder Robert Baden-Powell, felt compelled to note that ‘It is a common crime with “new chums” to call the blacks “natives”, thereby insulting many a true native within hearing: for be it known that blacks are “blacks,” or more politely aboriginals, whereas “natives” are of good English stock, doing full justice to their ancestors; and they are moreover proud of their title of *Natives*.’⁹

Bill Schwarz has argued that ideas of the embattled white man on the colonial frontier shaped how whiteness was imagined and culturally produced in the metropole.¹⁰ Whiteness was conceptualised, sustained, and tested as the needs of the moment demanded, and these needs differed by location. Whiteness could take on altered meanings when discussed with reference to Australians in different parts of Australia, or in New Zealand, South Africa or the Sudan. Though frequently inconsistent and illogical, the language of race could also be pragmatic. It was deeply and dynamically entangled with material acquisition, migration flows, and the maintenance of political and cultural power.

By constructing hierarchies of people, racial thought rationalised in advance the seizure of land and the subjugation of peoples, and vindicated these acts in retrospect. Its rhetoric of exclusion solidified internal social bonds, guarded against threats to organised labour, and provided psychological comfort. Increasingly, supposedly scientific theories were seen to give credence to racial ideas. One’s biology came to naturalise—rendering indisputable—disparate access to wealth and authority. For such reasons, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds suggest that settlers were passionately attached to, and defensive of, the whiteness that ‘at once global in its power and personal in its meaning’, bequeathed to them their privilege.¹¹

The global diaspora of British emigrants, many of whom landed on Australian shores in great waves between 1850 and 1890, was such that by the turn of the century, Melbourne, Sydney, and Adelaide had quadrupled their populations from the 1860s.¹² By 1890 there were more than three million Europeans living in Australia. In the period of this study alone the Australian colonies received some 1.2 million British immigrants.¹³ This demographic surge bolstered emotive connections between ‘mother country’ and colony. The Australian colonies could,

however, be internally fractious, and intercolonial competition was notorious. The 1850s brought Victoria (1851) and Queensland (1859) political separation from New South Wales. The opposing economic ideologies of protectionist Victoria and free market New South Wales reflected an intense rivalry amounting to distinct visions of the continent's future.¹⁴ This rivalry was largely conducted in the pages of the press, with David Syme's brazenly proselytising *Age* the platform for his pro-tariff convictions.¹⁵

Newspapers could echo *intra* as well as intercolonial rivalry, exemplified in bitter feuds between the liberal *Age* and the conservative *Argus* in Victoria, or South Australia's *Advertiser* and *Register*.¹⁶ Rival papers would stake their ideological territory and define themselves against one another.¹⁷ Alliances were also evident in the cable news cartels such that, during the 1885 Sudan crisis, the *SMH*, *Argus*, and *Adelaide Register* aligned with Reuters, while the *Age*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Adelaide Advertiser* formed a rival grouping. By the time of the South African War these competing factions had merged their operations.¹⁸

LAND AND PROGRESS

The communal bonds of race and ethnicity competed with social and historical tensions. Colonial society was, throughout the nineteenth century, riven by historical animosity between its Protestant English and Catholic Irish immigrants, and by class, gender, and sectarian disputes. It was also stubbornly unable to shake the remaining ignominy of the convict stain. Most fundamentally, there was the ongoing and violent dispossession of the continent's original population to make way for its new one. Mass immigration and land usurpation were in this sense component parts of a broader imperial process.

In the decades after 1788, convict labour stocks in New South Wales and Tasmania rose dramatically to lay the foundation for the colonial economy and its infrastructure. With the dismantling of systematic convict transportation, beginning in the eastern colonies from 1840 (lasting in labour-scarce Western Australia until 1868), many who had served their time joined others seeking land on which to build a new life. Later, large numbers of Chinese, Pacific Island, and Indian labourers, among others, replaced convicts as the cheap labour source of choice. They provided much of the man and woman power of the colonies, adding to the atmosphere of racial antagonism in those areas where they worked

among whites. As settlement spread, demand for land pushed against Aboriginal resistance.

Though Aboriginal labour holds a still under-recognised place in Australian history, it was, excepting the continent's northern regions, ultimately Aboriginal land rather than their backs that settler society was built on. The resulting dispossession and violence was a defining feature of colonial society, touching even the upper reaches of urban centres.¹⁹ The innovations of political freedoms and hard-fought victories for workers and women that colonists would rightly celebrate were grounded in a prosperity derived from the territory of Aboriginal British subjects, whose own political rights were severely curtailed.²⁰

Migrant Britons brought with them material innovations forged in Europe over preceding generations. Access to technologies of warfare, when combined with sheer weight of numbers could devastate less equipped societies. Exported commodity goods were produced according to imported economic philosophies. The capacity—and the disposition—to produce material wealth led Europeans to see potential prosperity wherever they looked; above the ground, on coastal pastures, and in the resources beneath it. This was a prospective, preordained vision that saw in the fertile Port Phillip region 'grassy parks ... prepared by nature, as it were, for sheep'.²¹ It was also a vision blind to Aboriginal land management practices that had created much of these same grasslands. Rapid wealth and population increases after the mid-century gold rush, when added to extensive wool production, seemed to prove the inherent worth of the settler project. The colonies could now be seen as a source of self-perpetuating material abundance. This view of the colonies was used to promote to Briton's their potential 'new homes'.²²

Development, improvement, and progress were ideals endlessly recited by colonists and overseas visitors alike, and were crucial in justifying possession of the continent. Commentators included those intimately connected to events covered in the following chapters. Howard Willoughby was a 24-year-old *Argus* war correspondent in the Waikato in 1863, a leading journalist and champion of Victoria's General Gordon statue at the time of the Sudan crisis, and editor of the *Argus* during the South African War.²³ In 1886 Willoughby wrote of the steady succession of pastoral stations that ensured that 'settlement creeps on' and 'Progress, though slow and unsensational, is sure'.²⁴ The importance of pastoralism exceeded economic concerns. It sustained the self-belief in what settlers were predisposed to do. Land itself could be an object of

passion. Settlers envisaged that this new terrain, if properly developed, could replicate their ancestral homeland, creating a tangible connection to Home. Willoughby impressed on his readers 'the vast new world where Saxons and Celts are peacefully building up another Britain'.²⁵ Yet this animating drive to production was troubled by descriptions of Aboriginal violence towards settlers.

The flipside to the obsession with progress was the abhorrence of stagnation, embodied in the stereotype of the idle native. Later, a not-unsympathetic Willoughby wrote that though the 'European had a right to conceive that the land was not in an occupation that need be respected ... more consideration for the original tenants might have been and ought to have been shown'.²⁶ Ultimately, 'So soon as the black has been dispossessed, and has ceased to be dangerous, the heart of the white man relents towards him'.²⁷ As it would. By the late-1850s, there had been a catastrophic drop in Victoria's Aboriginal population, from between 10,000-15,000 in 1835, to some 2000 fifteen years later.²⁸ This was accompanied by the explosive growth in the numbers of sheep grazing the lands that the rapidly rising population of settlers and squatters called their own.

Settler-Indigenous violence was hardly unknown in nineteenth-century Australia. Press reports often documented, however euphemistically, the occurrence of frontier conflict.²⁹ Popular books could be brutally candid. Future South African War correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and the *Argus*, Donald MacDonald, in a widely purchased 1887 volume on Australian nature and rural living, wrote, 'The reason we know so little about these aborigines is, that instead of studying we shot them.' MacDonald oversimplified but his message was clear; the settler invasion and their violence towards Aboriginal groups was the cause of their calamitous population decline. This sorrowful situation, he wrote, was 'surely our handiwork'.³⁰

George Rusden's 1883 *History of Australia* similarly contained long and harrowing accounts of settler-Aboriginal violence. For Rusden, the colonial propensity to ignore the Aboriginal matter was something of a necessity, especially when courting external spectators. It also conformed to more personal inclinations. 'It may', he wrote, 'have been thought prudent to be silent on a subject on which praise was impossible; or silence may have been caused by sympathy with the general neglect.'³¹ He spoke of a collective conscience of the colony of Queensland, haunted by the shrouding of 'dark deeds' in secrecy.³² This haunting would emerge in settler narratives in various ways, intruding into even the most celebratory

events. As Rusden's site-specific reference suggests, the different histories and political frameworks of the colonies conditioned local responses to settler-Indigenous violence.³³ Wholesale frontier conflict in Tasmania was by the 1860s a troublesome memory, while in Queensland it was, if anything, on the rise.³⁴ The pattern varied around the continent over time.

As might be expected, the stories colonists told (and tell) themselves tended to pardon the negative consequences of their settlement. Historians have long understood the need to fashion a consolatory relationship with a society's past. In 1973, Charles Rowley, on the back of a trilogy of pioneering books on settler-Indigenous relations, claimed that colonists, as 'usurpers', could not 'rest easy while the original occupier survives and refuses to concede and recognize his superior claim'.³⁵ Rowley suggested that this 'consciousness of usurpation by both parties has far more lasting effects ... than even the most extreme violence'.³⁶ The resulting interplay between a determined amnesia and an unabating memory ensnared settler histories in a process where traumatic acts were simultaneously acknowledged and absolved.³⁷

Everyday life in settler societies entailed what Mark Rifkin, drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has called 'perceptual editing', that tolerated Indigenous dispossession in ways that normalised settler presence.³⁸ The issue was not whether hostilities had occurred, but the problematic place they occupied in settler narratives. This was more complex than simply easing guilt. It was learning how to assimilate the brute facts of colonisation into the need to take pride in one's society.

Resolving this problem called on a variety of claims about Aboriginal people: their inefficient land use, their mandatory redemption by Europeans, and predictions of their impending demise. The latter rationale was particularly insidious. The only substantial differences in the common belief that Indigenous peoples were destined for extinction were whether this was a result of colonisation, or of something more mysterious. That it was a global view mitigated feelings of local responsibility. The position held on the matter would decide whether Aboriginal disappearance was to be regretted, celebrated, or quietly accepted.³⁹

In the colonies, however, pseudoscientific racial thought also raised disturbing implications. Tom Griffiths has written that the 'same Darwinism that comforted colonists about the destruction of the Aborigines created dark suggestions in their minds about the consequences of their own convict beginnings'.⁴⁰ The sensitivity of

Australian settlers to their history compromised tales of progress. This led to a paradox. Given the need to skirt around the more discomforting aspects of Australian colonial origins, history was a source of anxiety. Yet incorporating these origins into the grander cause of British expansion meant historical narratives could also help evade contemplation of unpleasant local chapters.⁴¹ We can understand much of the commentary on the Waikato, Sudan, and South African conflicts as attempts to resolve these tensions.

The often rapturous public reception of overseas military campaigns in the Victorian age contrasted with the response afforded to contemporaneous Aboriginal resistance to settler invasion⁴². The poet and journalist for several prominent Sydney publications, John Farrell, writing in the late-nineteenth century, captured the ambivalence of colonial involvement in domestic and foreign conflict. On the one hand Farrell wrote evocatively of the violence between squatters and 'blacks' over the land and the lingering anxiety over the destructive cycle of assault and revenge. On the other, he could give a starry-eyed account of his country: 'We have no records of a bygone shame, / No red-writ histories of woe to weep.' Rather God had 'hid her where the rage of Old World wars / Might never break upon her virgin feet.' Importantly, the material payoff was to come. For the almighty had also 'decked her with His bounties manifold / Of teeming mine and yearning unsown field, / And left her dreaming, till the years should yield / Their splendid dower of corn and wine and gold'.⁴³

Awareness of violence on the frontier also announced problems of legitimacy in Britain. In the mid-1850s the Colonial Office granted self-government of internal matters to settler governments in New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia, while Britain retained control of defence and foreign policy. Queensland was unique in being born into self-government upon separation from New South Wales in 1859 (though Western Australia would wait until 1890). The empire-wide trend of white, land-owning, male colonists gaining self-government had its genesis in the 1839 Durham Report that aimed to prevent another North American-style colonial rupture in Canada through the transfer of representative, then responsible government (while mollifying British taxpayers at home).⁴⁴ This development could equally appear to licence the seizure of Aboriginal land as colonists saw fit.

Land reform followed self-government in Selection Acts in Victoria (1860) and New South Wales (1861). These acts facilitated the official passing of Crown land, still used by Aboriginal people, into settler hands. As Mark McKenna has shown, the same legislation, empowered by talk of British birthrights, both authorised the seemingly progressive measures of breaking up squatter monopolies, while legitimising Aboriginal dispossession and legal invisibility.⁴⁵

In Australia, then, control over land law and Aboriginal affairs was transferred to colonial authorities despite frontier violence being widely publicised in local and metropolitan reports, and in the face of clear conflicts of interest between settlers and Aboriginal people.⁴⁶ Travelogues such as Charles Dilke's widely read *Greater Britain* told British readers, if they chose to listen, of the violence still occurring in Queensland, and of unnerving attitudes towards Aboriginal people in the decade after the colonies gained responsible government.⁴⁷

This problem exercised the minds of commentators in Britain and the colonies. Dilke himself, in a remarkable passage in his 1890 follow-up to *Greater Britain*, tried to soothe consciences about 'the treatment of [Queensland's] aboriginal Australian blacks' by running through the gamut of narrative strategies. He denigrated Aboriginal people as 'extraordinarily backward' and practically beyond help, claimed they were dying out, suggested their shooting might not have been unjustified while noting that whites were also killed by blacks, stated that violence was now 'a matter of the past' and, finally, informed readers that colonists themselves despised and regretted these acts.⁴⁸ Anthony Trollope, writing of his travels to Australia and New Zealand in the early 1870s simplified the matter, concluding that in the question of colonist versus Aboriginal in Queensland, 'the Australian black man ... has to go'.⁴⁹ Even philanthropists who quite sincerely argued for humane modes of settlement preferred not to realise they often benefitted from the same processes they decried.⁵⁰

Despite often disingenuous metropolitan finger-wagging, this was not simply a case of a benevolent metropole staring down malevolent settlers. Zoë Laidlaw notes in a different context that 'metropolitan elites had an interest in distancing themselves and the imperial state from their colonial counterparts, even whilst implicitly endorsing their actions'.⁵¹ The push of private interests, metropolitan investors, and settler lobbyists to expand their commercial and political horizons entailed the pacification

of those who would threaten this expansion. The options for imperial elites in Britain were acquiescence (often in the face of humanitarian protest), asserting imperial control through force, or funding colonial defence.

Ultimately, humanitarian influence notwithstanding, the desire to salvage Indigenous bodies and souls could not outweigh the need for their land and resources. For historian Tony Barta, the fundamental issue was that while most honest policymakers in London could well have anticipated the consequences for Australia's Aboriginal people of colonisation and large-scale immigration, they could not bring themselves to halt this process.⁵² In this sense, frontier conflict was less a regrettable deviation from imperial attempts to spread civilisation, than it was a symptom of empire.⁵³

Blaming specific circumstances was more comforting than coming to terms with the essential question of how the colonial economic system precipitated settler-Indigenous conflict. As they appeared in the press, these oversights enacted a basic ideological habit of news reportage: the discounting of systemic social features in favour of anomalies. That is, seeing the singular over the structural.

THE COLONIAL PERFORMANCE

Just as communities experience collective pride in celebratory stories of the past, they can also be bound by shared feelings of a more troubling kind. The relations between settlers and Indigenous populations played an important part in collective identifications throughout the British settler world.⁵⁴ A bond rooted in this process of solidarity—the emotional investment of being *in it together*—was something these communities were likely to feel intensely.⁵⁵ For these reasons we cannot dismiss affective language as mere rhetorical embellishment. Sentiment mattered.⁵⁶

This was especially so when colonists felt judged by the observers that mattered most. Alan Lester has argued that, from the first, settler colonies saw the press as a site of contest over what it meant to be British.⁵⁷ Besides being used to defend the principles of capitalist expansion, settler newspapers defended their societies from condemnation. Buoyed by their successes in undoing slavery, humanitarians turned to protecting the Indigenous populations in sites of British settlement, initiating a campaign that reached its apogee with the 1837 *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aborigines*. Settlers on the ground saw this as a direct threat, and humanitarian critiques clashed with their

idea of Britishness. Any challenge to the Britishness of settlers jeopardised their access to the British martial and economic support they required.⁵⁸

Settler papers spoke on behalf of wealthy and free white settler men across and between the colonies, and often against governing classes and imperial elites in Britain. They also seized on contentious moments to present a particular version of colonial identity.⁵⁹ Rebecca Wood shows how the *Sydney Herald's* editorials on the hanging of seven white men following the 1838 Myall Creek massacre sought to smooth over divisions between squatters and the New South Wales governing class. An idealised Australian settler was depicted as beset by naïve humanitarians who critiqued settlers for defending themselves, their families, and their property from violent Aboriginal raids.⁶⁰ In 1902, Queensland-born novelist Rosa Praed recalled an elderly visitor who had been in Myall Creek at the time of the massacre, and who, giving the 'squatters' side of the question, spoke of 'the evils of humanitarianism'.⁶¹ Particularly galling was the betrayal that settlers felt over the lack of protection offered to them as they toiled to produce the empire's commodities.⁶² Kenton Storey has also shown how in Canada and New Zealand in the 1850s–1860s, humanitarian discourse persisted after its supposed peak in the 1840s in the hands of often cynical newspaper editors who put its lofty language to use in wartime.⁶³

In light of their global identifications, and the influence of imperial elites in London, it is little wonder that colonists were fixated on their image.⁶⁴ The mother country's approval was especially necessary. That the Australian 'passion' for England, as Robert William Dale put it in 1889, made 'them extraordinarily sensitive to the criticisms of the English press' was well understood by contemporary visitors.⁶⁵ So too was the resulting tendency to overcompensate for a 'dread of inferiority' by the incessant boasting memorably observed by Anthony Trollope.⁶⁶ When directed at colonial misdemeanours, metropolitan scrutiny was wholly uncomfortable. It had to be refocused on features less detrimental to settler reputations. The performative role of newspapers was crucial. In the pages of the press the colonies presented themselves for observation, a dynamic facilitated by local stories being shipped to other parts of the empire for their information and entertainment.

It is worth stressing that much Australian press rhetoric was motivated by how colonists perceived themselves from Britain's point of view. Though settlers looked inwards to their own social features to assess

their value, it was only through external endorsement that this value could be fully registered. Howard Willoughby recognised that, as an Australian resident, his praise of the colonies required the verification of 'some traveller of repute'.⁶⁷

The military involvements in New Zealand, the Sudan, and South Africa can in this light be understood not only as axes around which meaning coalesced, but as moments when the position of the Australian colonies vis-à-vis Britain could be more clearly ascertained. This helps to explain the insistent questions Australian newspapers seemed to be asking, even if obliquely, in their commentaries: what did Australia mean to Britain? Where did they fit into the imperial scheme of things? What did Britain want from them? The answers to these questions had significant implications for how Australian newspapers reacted to British commentary on colonial affairs, and how British papers responded in kind.

IN BRITAIN

What could not be doubted was that the Australian colonies were part of a momentous broadening of British power and influence. The conditions for the British Empire's vast global expansion lay in a precarious geopolitical balancing act where considerations of prestige rivalled those of economics.⁶⁸ Of prime concern was India, described by Ronald Hyam as the 'piece of genuine imperial real-estate' held by Britain that 'validated her claims to be a world power'.⁶⁹ Although France and Russia would persist as Britain's chief imperial rivals, the naval menace posed by the French had, since the end of the Napoleonic wars, ceased to tie-up British resources, manpower, and finances. After 1815, the configuration of European power politics had shifted, leaving Britain in the prime seat.

Other mid-century geopolitical factors stood in Britain's favour in protecting its material interests.⁷⁰ Chinese disorder and Ottoman weakness, though concerning to imperial strategists, sidelined two potential contenders for global supremacy.⁷¹ An expansionist post-Civil War United States, ever-threatening in the minds of British elites, was, like Japan, not considered an overt rival to British power until the end of the century.⁷² It was the internal state of Europe, however, with its existing imperial powers locked in diplomatic stalemates or preoccupied with local matters, which had created the conditions for Britain to take advantage of its massive industrial might, its naval power, its financial,

communications and migration networks, and the vast colonial labour and military forces at its disposal.⁷³

This situation was already changing by the time of the Waikato War in 1863. The mid-century period saw several crises of empire; in India, Morant Bay, New Zealand, and Southern Africa, among others. Back at home, reform movements culminating in the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts, built on the 1832 Reform Act to further amend the social order. Reform challenged the received wisdom over the kinds of people who could have a say in political affairs. These questions were themselves bound up with issues of imperial power and British citizenship rights.⁷⁴ Later, related questions of imperial federation arose: should 'Greater Britain' be formally federated? Were the ties of sentiment enough? Or, were colonial nationalists to have the day?⁷⁵ Partly in response to ideas that the colonies might conceivably separate, the Imperial Federation League was founded in London in 1884, and its Australian branch in 1885. These issues gained prominence through a series of highly influential texts including Charles Dilke's *Greater Britain* (1868), John Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883), James Froude's *Oceana, or, England and Her Colonies* (1886), and Dilke's, sequel, *The Problems of Greater Britain* (1890). All these works to some degree intuited, and promoted, the emotive and racialised connections across the so-called British world.⁷⁶ Their ideas were debated in colonial and British parliaments, and reviewed and discussed at length in the press.

Yet what was happening outside of Britain's Empire was at least as important as what was happening within it. The realignment of European power relations would accelerate following the Prussian victory over France in 1870. Britain could now add Italy and, more significantly, Bismarck's Germany (both unified in the early 1870s), to its list of potential imperial adversaries.⁷⁷ By the 1890s, Britain's relative dominance was in decline.⁷⁸ The mid-Victorian period has for this reason been considered the high point of British imperial (relative) self-confidence, if not reaching the militaristic fervour of the century's end.

As John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson famously argued many decades ago, the gulf between the mid-Victorian and late-Victorian periods can be exaggerated.⁷⁹ Severe crises of confidence certainly occurred in the former period, most notably after the devastating Indian rebellion that erupted in 1857. And just as there were many who maintained a sense of assurance in the empire throughout the latter period, territorial expansion was not confined to the high imperial moment. We need only

note the 1840 annexation of New Zealand, among Queen Victoria's first major territorial acquisitions, and the aggressive internal expansion in the south-eastern Australian colonies.⁸⁰

The geopolitical situation that initially allowed for the preferred system of 'informal empire' had altered by the late-nineteenth century. Increased imperial competition hastened measures to secure and consolidate existing territory. This led to the fitful and defensive taking of new territory.⁸¹ It was this phase, the acceleration of an existing pattern, which was famously accompanied by a more vocally aggressive aspect in public communications, a show of self-confidence that masked deeper unease.⁸²

British anxieties throughout the second half of the nineteenth century frequently found expression in discussions over the empire's role in the world. The idea of empire gave a sense of permanence to a shifting arrangement of divergent enterprises, relationships, and processes that could be both dominant and frail. There was no single view of what empire meant, or should mean. Attitudes towards it were diverse and keenly debated among a wide variety of interest groups, religious activists, political and military opponents, businessmen, and outspoken ideologues. If something like consensus was to be found, it was in the ostensibly natural fact of its existence, and a vague faith that the progress it entailed might just redeem past sins. Imperial proponents proclaimed its virtues, and critics raised questions of the morally corrosive effects of imperialism in the British metropolitan 'home'. But, for most Britons, most of the time, empire 'was simply part of life'.⁸³

Understandably, nothing could better draw attention to debates over the empire than challenges to it, perceived or real. These challenges were of increasing concern as the century proceeded, and were not the sole preserve of the bureaucratic elite. The British public had increasingly come to equate imperial health with that of the nation, usually through reports supplied by the press. If British news was eagerly received by readers in the colonies, however, colonial news in Britain often amounted to intermittent background noise, relevant mostly for practical and commercial matters (the latest information on markets and prices, for instance), or for news of migrated family members.⁸⁴ Yet the manner in which the colonies were seen to fit into the empire's fortunes also shifted according to the geopolitical situation.

Despite increasing awareness of the benefits the colonies offered, and notwithstanding the promotional literature aimed at potential emigrants,

prominent mid-century British commentators commonly deplored British settlers for their costly demands and their treatment of ‘natives’.⁸⁵ By the 1880s, the colonies had undergone something of a recovery in British public commentary.⁸⁶ This was attended by a developing constellation of metaphors. From seeing the colonies as embarrassing and expensive children who were undermining claims to British liberality, by the end of the century Britons could increasingly read of maturing sons and daughters, and later of sisters and brothers sharing a more equitable family relationship.⁸⁷

Colonists in turn claimed that the territories they were ‘settling’ were the solution to emasculating metropolitan industrialism.⁸⁸ The period from the 1860s to the late Victorian era thus saw the Australian colonies become a crucial element in imagining white British supremacy. By the century’s end commentators saw the emergence, as Oxford historian Hugh Edward Egerton put it in 1897, of a ‘new spirit’ in the relations between the mother country and the colonies, one based on a shared sense of responsibility, unity, and mutual value.⁸⁹ This new spirit gained momentum as perceived threats to racial purity gathered force.⁹⁰

Still, until the end of the century, the colonies largely existed in British newspapers as they existed in imperial geography: peripherally. In 1869, John Martineau could assert that, ‘It seldom happens that English newspapers find space to notice Australia, or that English people care to make themselves acquainted with Australian affairs.’⁹¹ The point, though, I am suggesting, was that the colonies came to be invested with recuperative qualities in times of need.

The Waikato War (1863–1864) occurred during a moment of relative imperial optimism, the Irish question aside. The concurrent American Civil War claimed page space from events in New Zealand and, even when Australia was given attention, this usually concerned other affairs, most notably the transportation of convicts to Western Australia.⁹² A characteristic two-sentence snippet from the *Blackburn Standard* in 1863 could merely note: ‘The intelligence from the Australian colonies is of little interest beyond the fact that the colonists still continued zealous [sic] in sending volunteers to New Zealand. The working of the gold fields has been much interrupted by floods.’⁹³ Put simply, the threats to the empire that would occasion anxious assertions of imperial and racial solidarity at the end of the century were more manageable in its middle decades. The result was that the Australian colonies were less required to bolster British confidence than they would become.⁹⁴

Though Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson suggest that little news from the colonies would have been 'deemed worthy of telegraphic transmission', it is perhaps more precise to say that this news was muted until such moments when the colonies became 'worthy'.⁹⁵ When the colonies offered positive stories they allowed British newspapers not only to avert their gaze from internal troubles or external threats, but also to discuss the function of settler societies, a discussion eagerly overheard in the colonies.

As it happens, the historical timeframe of this book also marks in Britain what Aled Jones has described as the 'transformation of the popular newspaper from a fugitive literature which prowled the margins of social consciousness, to a professional and pervasive form of communication'.⁹⁶ Through their dispersal in reading rooms, cafes, libraries, and public houses, newspapers were increasingly accessible to all classes and levels of literacy.⁹⁷ The development of the press over this period followed the extension of education, reduced outlays after the removal of newspaper taxes, and decreasing costs in newsprint. More disconcertingly for middle and upper-class contemporaries, it also entailed the growing public participation of hitherto marginalised sectors of society, now targeted by sensationalist, radical, and feminist publications.⁹⁸

This dilation of the public sphere expanded the scope of what newspapers could offer. By the time of the South African War, populist papers such as the *Daily Mail* embodied a format, style and tone that simply did not exist during the time of the Waikato War. These papers aimed for a more popular readership and were boosted by an increasingly jingoistic atmosphere encouraged by war reportage.⁹⁹

By the late nineteenth century, the generally accepted civil function of newspaper journalism had changed. The conceptions of the ideological role of the press had shifted since mid-century from being a didactic 'improver' of the public to being its democratic mouthpiece.¹⁰⁰ This change came in three main waves. Firstly, the democratic 'free exchange of ideas' in the 1860s followed the successive abolition of the advertisement duty (1853), the stamp duty (1855), and the paper duty (1861). Secondly, the transitional period in the 1880s saw increasingly concentrated ownership, dependence on advertising revenue, and a mass, though diversified, readership. Lastly, by the century's end there was the populist content and more accessible format of 'New Journalism', itself both influencing and influenced by the social upheavals of the time.¹⁰¹

Consequently, the idea that publications such as the *Times*, the *Daily News*, and *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper* all spoke to, let alone represented, a homogenous public is clearly erroneous. Different papers appealed to different sections of society. They did so not only by way of political sympathies (conservative papers such as the London *Daily Telegraph* & Melbourne *Argus*; liberal papers such as the *Manchester Guardian* & Melbourne *Age*, and labour/radical papers such as *Reynolds's Weekly* and the *The Worker*), but increasingly through variations in format and price. Coverage of the British Empire within these papers differed in quantity, which generally increased from the 1880s, as well as in subject matter and tone.

Globally too, the cross-border exchanges facilitated by the press offer a salient example of an 'imperial commons'.¹⁰² We should nonetheless be cautious in celebrating reader agency. Despite providing avenues for contestation, newspapers remained largely elite vehicles rather than neutral mediums of exchange.¹⁰³ White middle and upper-class males were vastly overrepresented. The working classes, women, and, perhaps most of all, Indigenous peoples, were all spoken about far more than they were able to speak.¹⁰⁴ The following chapters necessarily, if unfashionably, focus on the voices of elites over radicals, men over women, colonisers over colonised.

<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-63774-7>

Settlers, War, and Empire in the Press

Unsettling News in Australia and Britain, 1863-1902

Hutchinson, S.

2018, XI, 288 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-63774-7