

# {essays in history}

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## Power through the People: British Migration and the Rise of the Pax Britannia-Americana



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Reviewed Work(s)

*Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939.* By James Belich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Pp. 592. Cloth, \$55.00.

*Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c. 1850-1914.* By Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Pp. 314. Cloth, \$78.00. Paperback, \$31.99.

How did Europe pull ahead of the rest of the world in the early nineteenth century? How did modern globalization get its start? Two recent, exciting books point to the same answer: the “British World.” The British World emerged from the great migration of the four “nations” of the British Isles – England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland – to the settler colonies of the British Empire – Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa – and elsewhere in the world where British people and culture resided, such as the United States and Argentina.<sup>[1]</sup> The British World more than quadrupled over the long nineteenth century (1789-1914), as the British Isles witnessed the emigration of an estimated 23 million people (overwhelmingly to the settler colonies and the U.S.) while increasing its own population from 16 to 45 million.

<sup>[2]</sup> In *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939*, James Belich establishes convincingly that a British World-led “settler revolution” pushed first nineteenth-century Britain and later twentieth-century America to global power through migration, explosive demographic growth, and the development of diverse, geographically large, interconnected economies. In *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c. 1850-1914*, Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson argue compellingly that the social networks of British migrants contain the seeds of today’s globalization, as those networks familiarized global economic interaction.<sup>[3]</sup>

Empires have attracted much academic attention since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, which U.S. President Ronald Reagan had dubbed an “evil empire.” Much of that research and analysis has centered upon the British Empire, the leading global power of the nineteenth century. From exploring the relationships between colonizers

and colonized,[4] to the role that the Empire played in British society, [5] scholars have demonstrated how people experienced “empire.” These “New Imperial” scholars neglect to explain how the empire functioned internally and externally. By following in the footsteps of earlier generations of scholars who focused on the settler colonies and imperial economics,[6] Belich, Magee, and Thompson fill this gap.

While British India has captured much academic attention,[7] the relationship between the United Kingdom and the settler colonies (officially known as Dominions after 1907) powered the British Empire in its last 100 years (1850s-1950s). Britons stood at the center of that relationship, whether they resided in London, Glasgow, Melbourne, or Calgary. The small “sceptred isle” did not solely control the massive British Empire; Britain and the Dominions formed a partnership that ruled the waves, each with defined roles. The Home Isles provided people, goods, capital, culture, and military power, while the Dominions offered opportunities, land, commodities, soldiers, and better weather. This partnership became more recognizable to all parties in the twentieth century.

The movement of British peoples, goods, and capital around the world highlights the second point that the authors bring back to British imperial history: economics. Migration, trade, and investment made the British World go round. Magee and Thompson integrate economic history with cultural history, as they show how Britons affected global economic flows with their cultural preferences for imperial destinations, products, and investment opportunities over more seemingly rational choices.[8] Belich frankly makes economic history good reading by adding people and places to the charts, graphs, and tables that make most economic history dry and, regrettably, forgettable.[9]

Belich’s *Replenishing the Earth* describes the historical process by which the “Anglo-World” (the British Empire and the United States) diverged from the rest of the world in the early nineteenth century. The Anglo-World grew through a series of construction booms and busts similar to this past decade’s global housing boom and bust. Belich divides the Anglo-World into oldlands (Britain and the Northeast U.S.) and newlands (nearly everywhere else). Events, such as the “peace bonuses” that followed the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1802, 1803-15) and the U.S. Civil War (1861-65), or transportation

improvements, such as the openings of the Erie (1825) and Suez (1869) Canals, triggered booms in specific newlands. With more people and, crucially, imports able to reach newlands, such as the Old Northwest U.S. in the late 1820s and Australia in the 1870s, populations grew exponentially for a period of ten to fifteen years until the bust inevitably came. Imports fed the work crews and animals who cleared farmland and built canals, railroads, and new cities like Chicago, Melbourne, and Winnipeg. Belich estimates that twenty separate “explosive colonization” booms occurred in the Anglo newlands of the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa from the 1810s-1920s (88-89). With the busts, imports and migration ceased, farms and railroads went bankrupt, and those settlers who remained sought commodity solutions – exports such as wheat, wool, and later refrigerated meat to oldland mega-cities of London and New York. In that “export rescue,” the oldlands “re-colonized” the newlands through tighter economic ties. In the first half of the twentieth century, the continental U.S. integrated its economy while “Greater Britain” – an economic and cultural amalgam of the U.K. and the Dominions – “co-owned” the British Empire. The settler societies of the American and British Wests grew through this “rhythm thesis” of boom, bust, and export rescue and allowed first for Britain and then America to dominate the world (548).

Magee and Thompson’s *Empire and Globalisation* examines the social networks that developed alongside the great emigration from the British Isles in the 65 years prior to World War I. With advances such as steamships, railroads, penny post, and wired remittances, emigration no longer created “social deaths” for migrants. They remained “British” no matter where they settled, particularly if they chose as their destination the settler colonies and, to a lesser extent, the U.S. They maintained close contact with their families and friends back in the old country and forged new relationships based upon shared Britishness in the settled regions. Within voluntary social networks – familial, local (old world villages and neighborhoods), regional (Scottish, Cornish), fraternal (Masons, Orange Order), professional (lawyers, botanists), and business (banks, insurance companies) – men and women swapped trusted information from the settlement colonies and the U.S. to the British Isles and back, funneling information on migrant destinations, the latest fashions, the safest railroad bonds to purchase, etc. The British state therefore had a limited, guiding role in the British World’s economy (13).

For example, while Parliament did not favor Australian bonds sold in the City of London (the world's financial hub), investors preferred them over Argentinean or Russian bonds. The directors of City investment houses knew Australian politicians personally and trusted their government to repay its obligation. In addition, the British Navy protected the colony, adding to the bonds' security. An "information asymmetry" existed in the bond offering. Investors simply trusted information more when it came from the social networks of the British World than from those beyond it. The British imperial state promoted free trade globally because it opened the world's markets to British migrants, goods, and capital. This limited globalization set the stage for the great economic flows of the early twenty-first century. As the authors note, globalization "is as much about people as machines" and the social networks they inhabit (3).

These two books synthesize recent and older research on the British Empire and the British World. Belich bases his groundbreaking argument nearly entirely upon copious secondary sources. He often intersperses his own writing with direct quotations taken from secondary sources, making it difficult to appreciate the extent of his originality. He nonetheless produces smooth prose in a work meant for both academic and general audiences. Belich could have incorporated more primary sources by integrating some of the diaries, letters, and correspondence of those millions who migrated to newlands. In particular, I would have liked to hear about those (mostly) men – workers on construction crews, gold rushers, and investors – who participated in multiple booms across the Anglo-World. Even accounts from well-known figures such as novelist Anthony Trollope or diamond and gold tycoon Cecil Rhodes could have documented the career paths of professional "boomers."[\[10\]](#)

While Magee and Thompson also rely mainly upon secondary sources, they incorporate some of their own new research as well. From the British Post Office archives on remittances to the U.K., they uncover how family connections primarily made the British World social networks flow (103). Unfortunately, they define social networks solely as private, grass-roots non-governmental organizations, thereby omitting important public social networks that developed within the British Empire. While colonial administrators, army officers, and imperial policemen served the state, they did not limit their social interaction to government business; rather, they spread British ideas, techniques, and

forms throughout personnel networks within the British Empire. For example, English-born Edward Henry perfected the science of fingerprinting in Calcutta as Inspector-General of the Bengal Police in the 1890s. He then organized the Criminal Investigations Department in newly British Johannesburg in 1901, and ended his career as Commission of London's Metropolitan Police from 1903-18.<sup>[11]</sup> These quasi-governmental social networks, such as the imperial policing network, connected the British World with the dependent British Empire and India. As these men moved between the Isles, settler colonies, and rest of the Empire, they connected the British World with the wider world, fostering the process of globalization.

That said, these two outstanding works significantly advance recent research on the British Empire and global integration. In particular, both works highlight the important role played by the United States in the British World in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars and commentators normally date the Anglo-American "special relationship" to the post-World War II era. It has existed, somewhat ambiguously, since American independence in 1783, with the Americans serving as the junior partner to 1900; more capital for the American West came from London than New York until that year.<sup>[12]</sup> Of the two works, *Replenishing the Earth* should have the more lasting influence. As every good historian should, Belich demonstrates how things change over time – the historical process – both at general and particular levels. The booms and bust of construction crews eating up natural resources, building infrastructure, and feeding mega-cities led to the *Pax Britannia* and *Pax Americana* of the modern world.

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[1] Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, "Mapping the British World," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31:2 (2003): 3.

[2] Belich, 73-4; B. R. Mitchell with the collaboration of Phyllis Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 6-8.

[3] Both these authors introduced their arguments in separate chapters of Sarah Stockwell, ed., *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

[4] For example, see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) or Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[5] For example, see Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) or Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[6] For example, see W. Keith Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937-42), Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1965 [1961]), or P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, Essex, U.K.: Longman, 2002 [1993]).

[7] For example, see Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) or Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[8] Magee and Thompson, 6-7.

[9] For example, see Lance Davis and Robert Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Economics of British Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[10] A prolific writer, Trollope (like Mark Twain) wrote travel books following his trips abroad, namely *North America* (1862), *Australia and New Zealand* (1873), and *South Africa* (1878), which all experienced “explosive colonization” booms during his travels. Rhodes helped initiate two separate booms in South Africa.

[11] “Edward Henry,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[12] Belich, 208-9.

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