

The Britannic Vision – Historians and the Making of the British Commonwealth of Nations, 1907-48

Review Number:

1059

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 March, 2011

Author:

William David McIntyre

ISBN:

9780230227811

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

392pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Andrew Ladley

The opening words of the preface to McIntyre's scholarly book are that it 'looks at the role historians played in a forgotten act in one of the grand dramas of modern history'. The 'forgotten act' took place in the first half of the 20th century when the Dominions and Britain were searching for some way of reconciling full independence alongside some constitutional and/or cooperative links – especially in the face and fighting of two World Wars. What the author meant by 'one of the grand dramas of modern history' is not clear; but the period included the World Wars, the formation and demise of the League of Nations, and the establishment of the United Nations, the end of the British Empire as it was transformed into the Commonwealth of Nations – all this was interconnected and dramatic, to be sure.

Given the massive body of documents and writing covering the formation and ending of British imperialism, including McIntyre's own impressive work on the Commonwealth, adding new perspectives was always going to be a challenge. Colonial administrators kept prolific records (the measure of governance over distance) and the processes were widely commented on and written about in contemporary publications. All this has provided endless mining opportunities for historians, resulting in some major works, such as Piers Brendon's *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997* (1), the magisterial Cambridge and Oxford histories of Empire and the British Documents on the End of Empire Project.

Despite all this information, McIntyre's *Britannic Vision* argues that the Dominion period is neglected, and that there is more to be said about the attempt by Britain and (most of) its key Dominions in the first half of the 20th century to keep the Empire 'British':

How the vision appeared, and was fostered; why it faded, and what role historians played in the process, are questions ripe for reappraisal at a time when historical interest is reawakening in the 'British World' beyond the British Isles (p. x).

Evidence of this 'reawakening' is epitomised by James Belich's recent book *Replenishing the Earth: the Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World*.⁽²⁾ One link between *The Britannic Vision* and *Replenishing the Earth* is that while the English settlers tried but failed to build enduring constitutional links between them, the historical, constitutional, linguistic and cultural associations nevertheless persisted. Belich argues that this continuity paved the way for English (and indeed superpower strategic) dominance for two centuries ('the Anglo-World'). McIntyre's detailed exploration shows that the attempts to maintain unity failed and then were lost in the complexities of the successor organisation, the Commonwealth of Nations. But the heart of the Britannic vision involved the attempt to stand together in two World Wars – and that vision was at least realised. Further, despite some changes in national priorities, its pulse still beats steadily. A point to which I return at the end of this review. First, it is useful to outline the structure of the book, locate the arguments in their historical context, and show how the book explains so much about the end of Empire and the formation of the modern Commonwealth.

Simply outlined, Part I summarises the careers and contributions of the 17 writers, picking up key areas to which they contributed. Part II goes into more detail, discussing terms and themes: Britannic, British, Responsible Government, Dominions, Home Rule, Commonwealth etc. The backtracking revisits the actors in the events, again (and again). This career summary and then terminological approach allows different perspectives to be examined and adds layers to the subtleties of the issues. In some ways it is like an archaeological dig unearthing the meanings of terms and phrases that were of vital importance to the times, then buried by 'history'. Still, the price is some struggle with the repetition.

The approach of the first two Parts contrasts with Part III, which comprises the bulk of the book. Again, we have multiple encounters with the dramatis personae. But here the approach is broadly chronological, setting out the structural constitutional issues in these last phases of the dissolution of the Empire. This allows the writers to be better woven into the texture of the period, mixing into the flows of characters, politics, and war. The South African General Jan Smuts emerges as a towering figure in the Dominion story, for example, being consulted directly by the Monarch on occasions, and personally drafting key phrases that marked the evolving free association of the Dominions with Britain. Of course, some writers (and some politicians, such as Winston Churchill and Enoch Powell) warned of the consequences of the end of Empire. Those wanting 'continuation' envisaged keeping the ultimate legal authority of the Crown in Westminster in an evolving Empire, and the search lurched between 'form' vs 'fluff'. As regards form, there was considerable discussion of constitutional possibilities like a federal structure of states, with ultimate responsibility on some core areas (foreign affairs, defence) in London, and with full self-government for the Dominions (and others who might, at some distant future point, follow). The more fluffy versions were mystical, including that the units would stay together because of trust, friendship, common heritage, equality, free association, voluntariness, King and 'Crown' etc. Most of these offered wonderfully elastic possibilities and it is here that the Britannic vision found its best supporters.

The focus of the book ends in 1947 and there is an extended epilogue that moves the story to the 'Post-Britannic Commonwealth' when the vision 'blurred into a fading dream' (p. 288). If the 'forgotten act one' of the great drama was the first half of the 20th century, 'act two' is the better-known period in which decolonisation gave way to independence – and from it emerged the modern Commonwealth of Nations. The word 'British' disappeared as a descriptor and all the previous key relationships, including the role of

the Monarch, were re-adjusted.

Even in 'act two' however, the key theme remains that problematic facts on the ground produced the need for new approaches, especially the demand for rapid independence in a domino effect. A concise paragraph captures the issues:

As in the 'twenties and 'thirties, unexpected cases induced the search for new formulae. Canada had pushed for separate representation at Versailles, separate treaties, and restricting the role of governor-generals. South Africa had demanded the declaration on status. The Irish Free State Highlighted 'anomalies and anachronisms' and went for external association and neutrality. India, with some help from Ireland, pioneered republican status. Similarly, at mid-century it was Gibraltar that sparked-off the Smaller Territories Enquiry and the Gold Coast and Sudan posed the question of Dominion status in Africa. Each of these cases had much wider repercussions (p. 288).

After 1947, the rapid decades of change produced independent states in the Commonwealth, recognising the Monarch as Head of the Commonwealth and symbol of unity, and with no remaining legal powers for any governance of any sort in Westminster (and certainly none for the Monarch as 'head').

The Britannic vision was a key part of the political adaptation that shaped the still-evolving Commonwealth of Nations. The processes have their roots in British history, including the development of parliamentary government in a monarchy, the battles in the European wars and religious conflicts, and the combination of governance, industrial revolution, trade and a navy that suddenly multiplied British power in Europe and the world from the 17th century onwards. There were particularly deep lessons for Britain in the loss of the American colonies, especially in its failed attempts to tax settler governments to help fund the costs of imperial war (even those fought for the settler governments!). Those lessons undoubtedly shaped Britain's relationships with its next bunch of self-governing settler colonies (Canada, Ireland, Australia, Newfoundland, New Zealand and South Africa) – and indeed, with the rest of Empire as self-government quickly transformed into independence and (mostly) membership of the Commonwealth.

What became the British Empire thus has no easy dates for beginning and ending – a simple point that says much. Brendon's *Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781–1997* dates the Empire from the British surrender to the colonists in the American war of independence and ends with the handing back of Hong Kong to China. In the broad brush of history, the Empire was consolidated over some two centuries (18th–19th), probably peaked (in terms of geographical reach, governing authority and global significance) at the end of the 19th century, attempted to find some means of reconciling settler self-government and 'loyalty' to the British Crown over two World Wars in the first half of the 20th century (the focus of this book), and was then rapidly dismantled in the few decades after the middle of the 20th century. The Empire's successor is the modern Commonwealth of Nations, a voluntary grouping of 54 states who recognise the Queen as the 'Head of the Commonwealth and the symbol of free association'. These are simple enough concepts, but McIntyre shows that their negotiation was complex, and that things kept changing. The first key issue was how to build relationships with the settler-governments essentially recognised as fully self-governing: the Dominions. On the basis that 'Dominion status within the Commonwealth, with the Monarch as Head of State' was the end-point of constitutional development, awkward stages followed. Some Dominions (Ireland, then South Africa) wanted to be republics; some emerging non-settler governments (India, Burma, Ceylon) wanted instant 'Dominion status' followed by republican independence (but still within the Commonwealth). And a host of other emerging states were knocking at the door: initially seeking Dominion status, but then bypassing it for independence, with or without the Monarchy as Head of State.

And so 'Dominion status' disappeared – even those to whom it had applied just dropped the title. Membership of the Commonwealth depended on acceptance by all other members, giving an effective veto to racist South Africa as Africa's states became independent. Under massive political pressure, South Africa

left the Commonwealth and was only readmitted with Nelson Mandela as president of a fully democratic South Africa in 1994.

McIntyre's work helps explain the enormous flexibility required to manage these changes. Asked to define the rules of membership so that Sudan and Ghana might know whether they would be admitted in the early 1950s, a British Minister explained:

The Commonwealth has no constitution and no rules, its only two established principles being the common bond of the Crown and mutual consultation. As things stand at present the test of full membership might amount simply to attendance on an equal footing at a conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers (p. 295).

Today, Commonwealth membership is still dependent on unanimous admission by other members. The members have either an historical Empire connection to Britain (the bulk of the members), or, more recently, a close geographical connection to a regional grouping of Commonwealth members (Mozambique, Rwanda) who champion their cause for admission. The addition of the last two would also have astonished almost everyone in the Commonwealth even a few decades ago – but their admission illustrates the process of adaptation explained in this book.

As noted, the re-crafting of relationships between Britain and its Empire can be seen in two 'acts': the first and second halves of the 20th century. In act one, the settler Dominions and Britain negotiated formulae under which they might be equal, independent, and cooperate voluntarily in the 'British Commonwealth'. This is the 'Britannic vision' – a term not used at the time, but coined by the author for this book. It concerned the attempt to hold the Empire together, especially for common defence purposes, by consent and trust and vagueness - rather than formal legalities – and by some sort of unifying role of the British Monarchy. The script of act one involved the negotiations between the Dominions (Australia, Canada/Newfoundland, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa) and successive British governments in London to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable i.e. the effective independence of the Dominions, alongside continued constitutional recognition of the monarch, including, especially, willingness to go to war together (or at least stay neutral in the case of Ireland in the Second World War).

McIntyre shows that the vision was shaped by the progressive political re-formulation of constitutional relationships by the elected heads of government, meeting in Imperial Conferences in Britain. He does not say so, but the notion that such meetings could presume at once to recognise and change constitutional relationships, would be baffling to anyone who did not understand the peculiarity of British 'constitutional conventions' – especially those involving the historical evolution of the role of the monarch in Westminster (and in the derivative self-governing parliaments). One great value of this book is that it offers historical insight into the evolution of conventions, the simplest of which was that whatever its legal authority to do so, the British parliament in Westminster would not legislate for self-governing 'responsible governments' without their consent. This convention was eventually turned into law in the Statute of Westminster in 1931, but its influence persisted. The convention was in large measure the justification used by the Southern Rhodesian settler government in 1965, for example, in its Unilateral Declaration of Independence.

A more central example of the role of evolving conventions, concerned the Monarchy itself. At the beginning of the 20th century, a single British Monarch reigned over all the Empire as a constitutional unifier. By the end of act one in 1950 or so, the Monarch was not only divisible (constitutionally reigning separately over lots of states, including Britain, Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand), but sub-divisible (with her Majesty's representatives as formal head of the Queensland, New South Wales etc in Australia and the provinces of Canada). That transition alone was conceptually and constitutionally impossible to imagine at the turn of the century – but within a few decades was settled practice. Similarly, it was impossible to imagine a republic that did not have the British Monarch as head of state – but by the end of the period, republicanism was a reality in Ireland, India and Pakistan, with many more to follow.

McIntyre shows the steps by which the impossible became possible, words were adjusted, minds adjusted – flexibility ruled. There is nice irony in his argument that modern historians (and citizens, not least from the Dominions) appear to have forgotten that a number of leading historians of the time helped write the script for act one.

But there are some problems with the core claim. McIntyre is a distinguished historian of the Commonwealth, so it might seem churlish to question the definition of ‘historians’ and how one measures their ‘contribution’.

From a wide range of sources, the author draws out the contributions of 17 writers/actors to the Britannic vision. Not coincidentally, all but two of these influential 17 were Oxford graduates ‘who not only recorded and interpreted the Britannic vision but who participated in and helped to formulate it’ (p. x).

But even allowing a wide terminological net, would the cast of 17 who helped to form the vision have all called themselves *historians*? Probably six would have (Keith, Coupland, Harlow, Hancock, Mansergh, Perham), and the entire cast surely would have acknowledged great interest in history (especially Roman and Greek), as educated people of that time did. Also, many of the characters had history in their degrees – again, as intellectuals at that time did, especially from Oxford (‘the Greats’). But their otherwise diverse backgrounds show they were also elected MPs, public servants, soldiers, intelligence officers, academics and journalists. Amongst the academic historians were academic international relations dons (Kenneth Wheare), and politicians who also did some history (Enoch Powell). Other MPs, like Winston Churchill, who wrote (and made) plenty of history as one of the key actors of the period, are not part of the cast of 17. Also, people changed roles. How might one distinguish the prior academic career of Canadian Oscar Skelton (1878–1941) from his massively influential 20 years as head of Canada’s diplomatic service? Was he really an ‘historian’ over his most influential years? Or consider Leo Amery (1873–1955), Conservative MP for Birmingham Sparkbrook from 1911 for 34 years, including as Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs over the critical periods, during which he played key roles in all the developments of this period. True, before becoming an MP he was a Times war correspondent in the Boer War and then edited the *Times History of the War in South Africa 1900–1909*. But I doubt he would have ever put ‘historian’ in his passport. Today, we might describe the 17 as intellectual contributors or direct political players in diverse roles, including as Cabinet Ministers, MPs, officials, diplomats, journalists, linguists, economists, and academics in political scientists in international relations, public administration, colonial studies and constitutional law, not least.

Weighing the relative contributions of these writers and thinkers to the vision, also requires some latitude. The back cover notes that the book is ‘a highly original account of the part played by historians in the British Commonwealth of Nations’. But how might one measure words like ‘roles’ and ‘parts’ as set against the rest of the actors on stage amidst the history of the period? That these writers were indeed contributors is well established, evidenced in ideas, publications at critical moments, some direct influences on cabinet papers, appointments to key positions (e.g. Skelton, founding the diplomatic service for Canada) and so on. Also, there was clearly a period when scholarship (especially at Oxford, but also in the influential journal *Round Table*) examined, explored and articulated the various options as the settler colonies evolved into self-government, Dominion Status and then full independence. But it would have been surprising were it not so amongst the intellectual elites of the period – these were their big international and constitutional issues in the First World War and in the Versailles conference establishing the League of Nations. And they loomed large immediately, as Britain looked for support from its Empire, especially the Dominions and India, in what was thought to be a coming second conflagration. That all these intellectuals – most from Oxford – were so intimately engaged with the Dominion and Empire story is extremely interesting in itself and probably warrants further research. One hesitates to use a phrase like incestuous, but there was undoubtedly a lot of collaborative exploration amongst like-minded intellectuals, caught up in the ‘high-mindedness’ of the issues. McIntyre might plausibly have done a book on the contribution of Oxford to the imperial and colonial vision – a point reinforced by a comment later in the book, where he notes that the Sudan Political Service was mainly staffed by Oxford graduates, producing the quip of the times that it was a country where ‘blacks were ruled by blues’ (p.297).

McIntyre's summary of Duncan Hall's conceptualisation late in 1918, whilst 'walking down The High in Oxford' (p. 34), is a wonderful illustration of a timely idea that became a key part of the Britannic vision. As a bright undergraduate, Hall was actively puzzling over these key issues of his times – and it struck him that the Dominions could be 'effectively independent' simply by the combined political leaders making a public declaration to this effect – thus avoiding having to tackle the logical dilemma of legally limiting the supposedly illimitable legislative sovereignty of the Imperial Parliament (p. 34). Hall's idea was published in a short Labour Party pamphlet in 1920 setting out the party's strategy for the evolving 'British Commonwealth of Nations' and then in a related book by Hall also in 1920. McIntyre writes that both pamphlet and book were 'amazingly influential, being later cited by Smuts, Amery, the leaders of the Irish Free State, and Indian nationalists' (p. 35). Further, the conception that declarations could make new constitutional relationships was elaborated in the famous 'Balfour declaration' in 1926, establishing effective independence on the record. However, it soon became clear that 'declaring' full authority, was insufficient for increasingly nationalistic South Africa and Ireland, champing at the Imperial bit. Pushed by those two Dominions, the formula was thus enacted into law in the Statute of Westminster in 1931 – one of the most significant pieces of legislation of the times.

However influential might have been Duncan Hall's insight 'walking down the High' in 1918, it is arguable that he was only articulating the established and still-evolving Dominion-London practice at that time – the new conventions. Putting this into new words, declarations and (soon) statutes demanded other contributions, including those of the key political actors – Smuts, for example, and later Hertzog, Fraser, Gandhi, Nehru amongst the non-UK bunch, and Mountbatten, Churchill amongst the Brits (none on the McIntyre's cast of 17, but all acknowledge by him as major contributors, of course). Weighing the relativities of 'contributions' is further complicated when the Imperial Conferences are placed in the contexts of the great sweeps of international events across the period of 'act one': World Wars, the formation of the League of Nations and then the United Nations, and the slippery slopes of decolonisation about to follow. There is a repeated sense in which the Dominions and London (and these 17 actors) were discussing a vision whose core real purpose was standing together in war. That purpose required genuine trust, shared values, and a willingness to send troops and spend funds. As the British had learned in the Americas a century or so before, none of this could be forced upon self-governing and self-taxing parliaments and peoples.

Whatever my minor difficulties with the definition of historian and how to measure contributions to the times, McIntyre brilliantly captures the somewhat mystical vision, full of ambiguities and undefined concepts. These could not survive any sustained demand for detail and specificity, especially words like independence, secession, or republic. As noted, this is the tradition of British 'constitutional convention' – rules of government that the actors regard as binding constitutionally, but which are not 'law', as such. These notions were well understood (and constantly practised) in the settler-states of Canada, Newfoundland, Australia and New Zealand. They were perhaps less well grounded in South Africa and Ireland, both of which had growing voter populations that resented British domination and hence, history.

Indeed, McIntyre shows also that for Britain and its six core settler 'self-governing possessions' the progression from self-government in the 19th century to equal statehood in the 20th was mostly negotiated in gentlemanly fashion by settler and British elites who saw value in the British Empire. But the obvious exceptions to gentlemanly negotiations amongst this group, were the Boer War of 1899–1902 and the Irish nationalist violence of the first decades of the 20th century. It is hardly surprising, then, that these were the two Dominions who consistently pressed the Britannic vision into more and more specificity to favour their independence – and who eventually left the association. In the 1920s and 30s, the rising nationalism in South Africa (by white voters) and Ireland demanded that their leaders seek faster, clearer recognition of independence. The British and the other Dominions bent with the winds to accommodate the South African and Irish demands. The flexibility only just held South Africa on the British side in the Second World War. Smuts narrowly managed to persuade a wavering South African parliament in 1939 to dump its nationalist government that wanted to back Germany, reflecting the Afrikaner memory of the Boer War. But even the new flexibility could not prevent Ireland from refusing to back Britain, and declaring its neutrality. This was

a blow to Britain, though dramatically less so than Ireland being an enemy state.

Hence the book shows that trust and conventions faced historical and political realities. Those Dominions that had experienced British conquest and war (South Africa, Ireland – then the rest of Empire) wanted specificity. Any formal structure demanded subordination to London and informal cooperation risked the same, however fluffily expressed. Across 30 years, word by word, phrase by phrase, comma by comma, the meetings of Prime Ministers from 1907 until the end of the Second World War redefined the core concepts. There are some deeply significant events, delightfully captured by the author. For example, a pivotal meeting (which was extraordinarily long by today's standards: weeks!) of the UK and Dominion political leaders in 1926 produced what became known as the 'Balfour Declaration'. This established the political equality of all the members of the British Commonwealth. Its key terms were that the UK and Dominions were of equal status, in free association and bound by a common allegiance to the King. Of the meetings that wrangled over the words, McIntyre writes:

There were "no notes and minutes of any sort or kind". The formal record of the Committee simply notes dates of meetings with – "No minutes were kept". It is, therefore, highly ironical that Balfour's sub-committee is one of the best-known episodes of Commonwealth history. Absence of formal records never inhibits enquiry. Private diaries, memoirs and biographies abound. And Hankey (the Cabinet Secretary of the British Government), the very perpetrator of the no-minutes policy, could not resist his recorder's habit and wrote two long letters to Baldwin and another to Balfour outlining what transpired! (p .167–8)

Another example is the wrangling that produced what is surely the most famous 'comma solution' in diplomatic negotiations, known as the 'O'Higgins comma' (p. 168). In 1926, Irish nationalists were already strongly pressing for complete independence from Britain, including the six Protestant counties in the North. For the declaration at the end of the meeting, thus, Kevin O'Higgins for the Irish objected to any formal linkage with Britain, epitomised in the then standard phrase: "Great Britain *and* Ireland". O'Higgins ingeniously proposed replacing the conjunction *and* with a comma, as in: 'Great Britain, Ireland and the British Dominions beyond the Seas'. The formula worked and Ireland stayed longer in the system, albeit with increasing determination to leave (which it did, in 1949). Another nice irony is that the compromises that Ireland sought in the 1920s (and which were refused), eventually became the basis on which India and Pakistan were admitted into the Commonwealth as republics in 1949 – just as Ireland was in fact leaving.(3)

Having formed the Britannic vision in the early 1920s, it was dismantled to accommodate the demands for clearer independence. In 1931, when the Statute of Westminster made it clear that the UK Parliament could no longer pass laws for Dominions without the express consent of Dominion Parliaments, New Zealand wanted nothing to do with it. All parties in the New Zealand parliament were content in the 1920s and 30s to live with the mysticism of the Balfour Declaration and a place at international meetings in its own right. New Zealand's reluctance for overt constitutional change was not just because of nostalgia over shared culture and heritage. Wellington feared losing the favourable financial borrowing rates from London Banks on which it depended for capital – the rates were substantially lower because of the ambiguity that New Zealand was still in some way part of Britain and hence the loans were 'as safe as the Bank of England' .(4)

From 1926 onwards, however, despite having just come through a disastrously bloody and poorly fought First World War (indeed, *because* it had just done so, given the Treaty of Versailles), Britain was increasingly nervous of another impending European conflict, and it wanted to be sure that Dominions and India would unequivocally stand with it in a European war. McIntyre shows that in one of the few serious attempts at securing a common security foreign policy between the UK and Dominions, the group agreed that the UK should, on behalf of them all, renew a security treaty with Japan to secure peace in the Far East for Britain and the Pacific Dominions and other Far East British interests (such faith in treaties!). In that context, it is not surprising that the real heart in the vision formula was whether the Dominions would join with Britain in war, the ultimate test of 'allegiance' – however worded. It worked for the Second World War,

though only just in South Africa, and Ireland declared neutrality. Indeed, Ireland negotiated special flexibility to have its own form that would avoid pledging ‘allegiance’ to the Crown and, allow republicanism, neutrality, and, shortly after the war ended, full secession and withdrawal from the Commonwealth.

Inspired by Ireland, key Indian leaders also took advantage of the war to demand immediate self-government (without elections!) for the Congress Party as a condition for continued cooperation and support, to be followed by independence after the war. Despite deep misgivings on the British side about whether the people of India were ready for the forces of nationalism, the arrangement was agreed and it enabled the Japanese advance to be stopped in the jungles of Burma.

As McIntyre makes clear, India’s arrangements had not come out of the blue. Given the contribution of Indian troops to the First World War, India had been represented separately at Versailles in 1919, marking its early entrance onto the world stage of recognition, despite having no self-government. Thereafter, there was an increasingly desperate search by Britain for a constitutional and political outcome that might be acceptable to all the people of India. The British had long drawn a distinction between ‘British India’ (governed by the British Governor in Council) and ‘the Princely states’. The latter were ruled by local princes and semi-feudal authorities, with British ‘residents’ to ensure some conformity with the rest of government. In a delightful chapter, McIntyre connects the dots with the vision. Ghandi and the Congress Party were threatening to make India ungovernable by ‘passive resistance’ and demanding independence under a new constitution. But as Ghandi’s (mostly Hindu) nationalism was building, so was that in the Muslim-majority areas, and, separately, nationalism in Burma. With only limited experience of local and regional government, the prospects of constructing an Indian central government, at speed, without violence, as the Depression took hold in the 1930s and as the Second World War loomed, exercised the most agile of minds. Faced with the dramatic successes of the Japanese on the borders, and the prospect of an ungovernable India should the Congress party have delivered on its threats, constitutional agility produced a quick solution that saved the war effort by accepting ‘instant Dominionisation’ of India by a Congress-led government taking charge without a new constitution and without elections.

This is in itself a great illustration of how the evolution of the previous Dominions had produced formulae that could be deployed to suit the situation – all the more so because Dominion status itself then became irrelevant. Alas, the quick fix in India fulfilled the prediction of both those who demanded full independence for India as the only option, *and* those who warned of grave instability. Millions fled or were killed in the partition of Pakistan from India, and the two states entered into a state of war that in 2011 has still not been resolved.

Though McIntyre’s account significantly enhances understanding of the evolution of arrangements leading to the modern Commonwealth, his work goes considerably further by opening lines of further inquiry. For example, it is interesting to ask four questions:

- Why the Britannic vision might be regarded as a ‘forgotten act’ in the great dramas of the period?
- What happened to the central importance of ‘common security’ in the vision?
- How did the UK’s view of its place in the world change?
- How did the conceptualisation of the Britannic vision fit into the grander visions of international affairs (the League of Nations, United Nations and the European Union)?

McIntyre only briefly engages with his own point of why the Dominion ‘Britannic vision’ period might have been ‘forgotten’ by historians and public alike. He notes that historical fashions moved on, leaving the period under-considered in the history of the Commonwealth (p. x). Of course, there are generally complex reasons why academic fashions change. But in this instance, McIntyre’s study itself suggests (possibly uncomfortable) answers to why the Dominion period was apparently forgotten. Put simply, the Britannic vision was really only of interest to the ‘settler dominions’ – and even there, of most interest to those who valued their British heritage, especially in the face of war. Thus Ireland’s deep resentment of the British Crown steadily increased with the ‘home-rule’ extension of the franchise in that country from the early parts

of the 20th century. Similarly, the post-Boer War Afrikaners, had long memories and deep ‘foundation myths’ of their lost republics/freedoms and it was also inevitable that they would discard the British heritage once their numbers and nationalism had gelled into a solid political force. But putting aside Ireland and South Africa for a moment, Canada, Australia and New Zealand saw their economic and security destinies alongside Britain. ‘Empire’ was still a noble ideal and ‘British’ a tag of pride.

In contrast, the Caribbean, Asian and African colonies had somewhat less of this sentimentality or pride. And the demand for self-determination in the UN Charter in 1945, changed everything. ‘Empire’ became associated with domination and racism. The new themes were decolonisation, independence, freedom and anti-racism. There was no place for subtle processes and understandings between the Dominions and Britain. The new states emerged in a flurry of Independence Acts and Constitutions from Westminster and chose whether to join the blurry framework of the Commonwealth, or not. They were far more likely to pillory London’s racist colonialism, than to acknowledge any shared heritage and history. Britain voluntarily accommodated a process that would end its Empire. As noted earlier, 20th century Britain had learned critical lessons from its experience in the United States in the 18th century, including:

- to avoid massive British expenses in distant wars, settler colonies should be self-sufficient in their own revenues, responsible government and defence as soon as possible;
- demands for expanded self-government from British citizens could not be resisted by force (and the British taxpayer would not countenance the expense); and
- taxpayers/citizens in self-governing polities were reciprocally unlikely to participate in a British war, other than as a result of the decisions of their own governments.

The result was that the 19th-century settler colonies were progressively given such independence as they wanted. After the Second World War, and with the UN General Assembly demanding decolonisation, these same rules were applied to every colony, not just the settler states. Despite grave misgivings about timing and readiness, independence was essentially available to every entity that wanted it – except Hong Kong and white-ruled Rhodesia, both for special reasons.

Small wonder, then, that historians’ interests moved on from the Dominion period – it was considered irrelevant to the bigger issues that followed. But McIntyre is still surely right to argue that the relative neglect has obscured a deeply interesting piece of the evolutionary jigsaw.

A second example of trails this book invites one to explore is whether, in fact, the core security dimensions of the Britannic vision did not succeed, rather than fade. As noted earlier, all the Dominions (and many of the colonies) supported Britain in the First World War and the peak of the Britannic vision involved preparing for the Second World War. The strategy worked. Except for Ireland, the Dominions and the colonies fought with Britain – and indeed were probably essential in stopping the Axis conquest of Britain itself, as well as of North Africa – in addition to the Burma/India frontier. In the event, however, empire solidarity was not enough. The tide only really turned with the support of that older set of colonies, the United States. After the war, the objectives of the UK and its remaining dominions, plus the USA (Belich’s ‘Anglo-World’) standing together in the face of security threats, took on a new dimension, which arguably developed directly out of the Britannic vision period. McIntyre shows that in the early 1950s when India and Ceylon pressed for membership, for example, and the questions about Sudan and Ghana were looming, officials were stumped at how to hold the ‘Inner Ring’ (p. 293–4) where defence issues could still be discussed, without the obvious resentment from those left out. In the end, there was no way out other than to admit all new states, but to remove confidential defence and security issues from the Commonwealth umbrella and place them elsewhere.

The somewhat secretive form of that is the unique and ongoing intelligence cooperation between the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. But more obviously, this cooperation still extends to military commitment, with subtle but important differences in when each will commit forces, and with whom they work most closely. Examples include the Falklands War in the early 1980s, the first and second Gulf Wars (Kuwait and Iraq), Afghanistan currently, and, for Australia and New Zealand currently, regional

cooperative exercises in East Timor and Solomon Islands. So the 'Inner Ring' changed form, dropped South Africa, added the USA, and survived.

A third line of inquiry that emerges from this book concerns Britain's re-evaluation of its place in the world. As its Empire disintegrated, Britain realised that its economic and security future actually lay amongst its centuries-old rivals in Europe and in its 'special Atlantic relationship' with the United States of America. This echoes one of McIntyre's 17 thinkers, Oscar Skelton, who consistently argued that Canada should accept that geography ultimately shaped foreign policy, and hence would focus Canada on North America rather than on '... Australia or Timbuctoo, or whatever other part of the map a Jingoistic spree may chance to paint red' (p. 27). Accepting that McIntyre's cast of 17 were drawn from those engaged with the Britannic vision, it is especially interesting that there appears to be almost no conception amongst them, of how the Commonwealth would relate to any other form of international collectivity. Apart from the victors gathering at Versailles to try to prevent another World War by forming the League of Nations (and effectively prodding Germany to rearm at the injustice of the settlement), the discussions around the Imperial conference table were all about how Britain would build alliances for another war. The League was, this history suggests, irrelevant. McIntyre quotes Coatman (following Zimmern and Curtis), only a decade or so before the Second World War, waxingly nobly lyrical about internationalism for the emerging Commonwealth:

The British Commonwealth was seen as a 'microcosm in being of the world community of the future'. It was the '*primum mobile* of the international Commonwealth of the future' and 'new Dominions of the future' would bring strange new elements into the life of the whole. (p.52)

No League - all this was British. Did these writers presage the post-War formation of the United Nations and (what became) the European Union, in filling these noble ambitions of international cooperation? Again, it would be interesting to explore how any of the cast of 17 saw Britain, the Dominions and the Commonwealth as repositioning to fit into the new international collectives. But that must be for another day, another book, perhaps.

Conclusion

The Britannic Vision offers insights that explain so many aspects of the end of Empire, the ambitions of mutual cooperation in a shared vision and the difference between the settler Dominions and the rest of the Empire. McIntyre writes that when constitutional change for India was being debated in the British House of Commons in 1935, the British government of the day refused to commit itself to granting Dominion status as a matter of policy and law. The reason for refusing to do this, in the words of then Attorney-General Sir Thomas Inskip, was that Dominion status was 'a thing of life, a spirit and growing, and not a dead thing of legal form' (p. 207). The proposed reforms proved to be inadequate and were rejected by India's new political leaders. They were not interested in 'spirit and growing'. They wanted an independent republic, under a constitution drafted by themselves. One interpretation of the parliamentary debates is that the British government was obfuscating, in an attempt to deny Indian self-determination. Another is surely that the government could not yet see beyond the Britannic vision, which, for the decades before, had so infused the meetings of Prime Ministers in London. How things changed. After the end of the Second World War, the mystical vision was gone – independence, that 'dead thing of legal form', was very much constitutionally alive, everywhere. And Dominion status, that 'thing of life, a spirit and growing', was dead (or at least, restricted to intelligence cooperation). In terms of the subtitle of the book, one might question the classification of McIntyre's entire cast of characters as 'historians' and what weight, in the scheme of things, should be given to their contributions to the debates about how to keep the Dominions 'British'. But it is much harder to question the value of this work to understanding some of the great intellectuals of the period and the history in which they were players. It is a deeply interesting book.

Notes

1. Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781–1997* (London, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: the Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World* (Oxford, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The Northern Ireland 6 counties were then controversially separated from the South and joined back to Britain (and the phrase then returned to: ‘Great Britain *and* Northern Ireland). All this paved the way for another 50 years of conflict over the status of Northern Ireland, issues that are in 2011 still unfolding in the recent treaty/constitutional compromise between Britain *and* Ireland. Inevitably, given the history, the solution has been found in the simple notion that government must be by consent. Hence, the people of Northern Ireland are allowed to choose their own form of governance, including whether to be part of Britain, or Ireland. Whilst the Catholic minority of Northern Ireland appeared to be in perpetual minority, this formula was completely unacceptable to the more nationalist-minded. But as it has become clear that Catholics will in about 20 years become a majority, so the formula has provided an acceptable basis to end the Irish Republican Army insurgency.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. This particular point is discussed in A. Ladley and E. Chisholm, ‘Who cut the apron strings and when? Adopting the Statute of Westminster in New Zealand in 1947’, *Political Science*, 60, 2 (2008), 15–40.
[Back to \(4\)](#)

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