

Empire of Scholars: Universities, Networks and the British Academic World, 1850-1939

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Tamson Pietsch is a lecturer in Imperial and Colonial History at Brunel University, London. Her own academic pathway from Australia to Oxford mirrors that of her predecessors who feature in this study of the 'Empire of Scholars'. We need to know more, she argues, about who made knowledge in the Empire and the social and intellectual context which informed that knowledge. Her main concern is the institutional and social practices employed by universities and academics across the British settler world – that is, the networks linking the metropolitan centre to Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and interchanges between these white settler colonies. Such networks, argues Pietsch, encouraged 'fluidity' between 'British and 'colonial' or 'settler' academia but have been neglected despite the growing interest in imperial networks, transnational exchanges, and the construction of colonial knowledge. Yet they were important in fostering a sense of being part of the empire and, more specifically, the 'British World' (pp. 2–5). Until the 1930s American universities and academics were only on the fringes of these networks and Europeans were rarely admitted; the Afrikaans and French-speaking universities in South Africa and Canada respectively are also not included in this study (p. 7).

Pietsch's starting point is the mid 19th century with the establishment of the earliest settler institutions and the development of the first academic links. Settler universities adopted old world models but also reflected colonial politics, often funded by the settler state to provide the sons of colonial elites with a character-building classical education. To meet the new needs of expanding and developing settler colonies, these

universities broadened their curricula to include engineering, medicine and other technical subjects. With new competition from Germany more emphasis was placed on research in both settler and British universities and scientific, professional and applied subjects were now seen as 'central to national and imperial development' (p. 31). Changes in the ethos of empire after 1870 saw the expansion and tightening of imperial bonds, including the development of a stronger framework for imperial, and hence academic, networks. In 1907 the League of Empire sponsored an Imperial Conference on Education; in July 1912, the first Congress of the Universities was held in London, representing 53 universities and with 60 per cent of delegates having had direct experience of living and working in the Empire. A Central Universities Bureau of the British Empire was established at the Imperial Institute in 1913. The ethos of these academic networks reflected the dominant ideological context of the day; the 1912 Congress was 'framed in the gendered and gentlemanly, racial and familial discourses fundamental to imperial cultures of the era' (p. 1) and Indian and South Asian universities and colleges were excluded from these networks.

The First World War further strengthened academic connections, particularly scientific networks, and these connections continued to expand in the inter-war years. During the war, claims Pietsch, the work of universities, British and settler, was 'indispensable to national survival' (p. 145). In 1921, the Second Congress of Universities of the British Empire took place and congresses were subsequently held every five years. In the 1930s the Universities Bureau of the British Empire began to function as a professional association that rationalised relations between the universities, with settler universities increasingly using its appointments service (p. 158). The Bureau also represented British and settler universities on the League of Nations Committee on Intellectual Cooperation founded in 1922 and embraced a new language of internationalism. More emphasis was placed on the need to extend academic interchange programmes to France and the United States as well as the Dominions (as the settler colonies were now known). The advent of airmail in the 1930s speeded up the circulation of research findings and air travel increased mobility.

After 1918, however, forces working to erode networks also gained momentum. These included anti-colonial challenges to colonial knowledge and scientific racism, the impact of refugee scholars fleeing from Nazism which resulted in new connexions and new ways of thinking, and the increasing influence of American academia and philanthropic foundations. The Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations now funded research in the empire and provided travel grants to settler academics to study in the United States. It was these latter organisations, argues Pietsch, that most explicitly sought to infiltrate and reform British academic practices, a form of American cultural imperialism (pp. 174–8). The Second World War and after witnessed the further development of transatlantic links, as well as anti-colonial nationalism in the non-settler colonies. The Universities Bureau became the Association of Universities of the British Commonwealth and, in 1963, the Association of Commonwealth Universities. With the decline of empire and Britain's turn to Europe in the 1950s the interests of metropole and its old 'white' commonwealth, where stronger nationalist sentiment fuelled demands for greater settler autonomy, also diverged. By the early 1960s the 'Empire of Scholars' was in the past, although cultural and academic links persisted.

In charting these developments Pietsch divides her study into four parts which elaborate on the main themes of her study. The first part, 'Foundations: 1802–80', addresses the development of settler universities; these took a variety of forms but all sought to 'localise the universal culture taught in British Universities' (p. 21). Part two, 'Connections: 1880–1914' focuses on imperial expansion and tightening of networks. It examines the 'connective mechanisms' that forged 'bridges across the empire', including libraries, academic publications and the development of university presses in the dominions, travelling scholarships for students and leaves of absence for staff. Pietsch also considers appointment practices and the issues of access and exclusion they raised. Networks were facilitated by speedier communications, greater mobility and the founding of institutions whose aim was to strengthen imperial links, such as the Imperial Studies Group (1887), and the Victoria League and League of Empire (both founded in 1901). The third section, 'Networks: 1900–39', highlights ways in which academic networks 'reshaped the geographies of British academia' (p. 55) and became fundamental to 'the dynamics of knowledge production' (p. 119). Personal networks played a prime role in making academic careers and professors in settler institutions were instrumental in helping their students secure entry into British universities. Some of these stayed in Britain

and, in turn, also helped settler students, further consolidating and expanding networks of support (pp. 110–11). Despite greater emphasis on merit than patronage in the late 19th century, personal contacts also remained important in appointments, and selection practices adhered to a ‘global colour line’ (p. 72). Settler universities had to rely on personal systems of trust when academic staff were recruited in Britain and private recommendations were regarded as more trustworthy than public testimonials (p. 66). The final section, ‘Erosions: 1919–60s’, is somewhat brief, reflecting the book’s main preoccupation with the period before and during the First World War.

One of the key themes that emerges from Pietsch’s study is exclusion; these academic networks were white ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and male. As Pietsch points out, settler and British universities ‘fostered and rewarded masculine cultures of sociability’ from which women were excluded (p. 80). Women and Asian and African scholars and students were excluded from this academic club of the British World. University education was extended to women in Britain and the settler colonies in the 1880s. By 1900 there were an increasing number of women graduates, some of whom found academic employment as demonstrators and assistant lecturers in settler universities. Settler women also studied in English and Scottish universities on travelling scholarships. After the First World War more women were appointed as lecturers but, as Pietsch stresses, barriers remained severe. By the 1930s the women professors accounted for no more than 1.5 per cent of academic staff and had unequal working conditions and lower pay. Perceptions about the gendered character of different branches of knowledge also restricted women’s participation in academic life (pp. 79–80). Yet, observes Pietsch, women were ‘vital components’ in helping academic husbands with research and facilitating male sociability. Through marriage into academic families women also helped sustain and reproduce an ‘intellectual elite’ that further cemented networks across the academic world (p. 80).

Exclusions on racial grounds were even more pronounced. Rhodes scholarships to study in Oxford, established by Rhode’s will in 1901, were designed to forge bonds across the English speaking world and thus imperial loyalty. It was only after 1940 that the scholarships were opened up to Asian and African students. By the late 1930s, however, there was an increase in overseas students from the ‘non-settler empire’ studying in Britain who, excluded from the racially exclusive academic world, forged their own networks. British universities now became a site of intellectual exchange for African and Asian students who began to challenge the colonial knowledge produced by inter-imperial academic networks (p. 179). A minority of academics were also disrupting the academic and imperial status quo. At the London School of Economics (LSE), the Polish-born anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski began to criticise imperial conceptions of race. His fellow academic ‘outsider’ at the LSE, Harold Laski, who was Jewish, was a supporter of Indian independence. In 1938, the LSE appointed the West Indian economist, Arthur Lewis, as the first black faculty member (he was given a chair at Manchester in 1945). The Second World War accelerated these changes. There was greater emphasis on the need for colonial development and, following the recommendations of the 1944 Asquith Commission on Higher Education, university education was extended to the ‘non-settler’ colonies.

Pietsch has found a fresh angle on the history of late empire. Her detailed and informative monograph provides a comprehensive study of the culture of academia in the later imperial era and also includes insights into the development of modern universities, including the fact that PhDs were only introduced in British universities in 1917. American universities, which adapted the German, rather than the English, academic model awarded doctorates before that time and thus drew Canadian students away from the imperial orbit (pp. 33–4). PhDs were only awarded in Australian universities from 1946. Pietsch’s study also reminds us of an era when university education was for the privileged few. In 1938 there were only 3,994 academics in the UK teaching 50,002 students in 16 institutions (p. 185). Proportions of women, and, more so, students from the non-settler empire, remained miniscule (p. 178). How things have changed!

‘Empire of Scholars’, however, is clearly derived from a PhD and, whilst it has undoubted value for specialists in the field, it reads rather densely in places and the arguments regarding the significance of networks are not always clearly articulated. The conceptual framework is influenced by recent studies of migration, networks, knowledge production and cultures of empire (1) but the ideas applied to networks by postmodern geographers do not always sit well with the empirical detail. There is more emphasis on science

than the humanities and the newer social sciences, which, notes Pietsch, gained greater recognition after the First World War as being vital to producing ‘educated citizens of an imperial democracy’ and promoting peace (p. 154). The social sciences, in particular, were important in articulating anti-colonialism, although Pietsch devotes little attention to this.

Pietsch is strong on how universities evolved, developments in institutional structures and curriculum and how this helped to sustain empire but less so on the implications of the colonial knowledge they produced and the role of universities in the process of decolonisation. More might have been said here about the contribution of the humanities, including anthropology, to government policies designed to ‘manage’ the growth of anti-colonialism and to promote colonial development. The LSE, which Pietsch infers was a beacon of academic progress towards greater inclusivity, now harnessed social science expertise to inform new colonial policies to manage the transition from Empire to Commonwealth whilst retaining British influence. The expansion of the humanities, combined with the greater emancipation of women after the First World War, also enabled more women to enter academia.[\(2\)](#)

On balance, though, this book has succeeded in its aim of writing settler universities into the history of British academia (p. 199). Pietsch provides an extensive bibliography and has used an impressive range of archival sources to illuminate a neglected aspect of imperial history. Her study provides insight into a world held together by informal personal ties as well as institutions, which was also a ‘masculine, exclusionary, shifting and unequal world’ (p. 200). Profound changes occurred after the Second World War that disrupted and changed this world irrevocably. Of particular significance is the global dominance of American academic knowledge and institutional structures and the weakening of Britain’s imperial relationship with its ‘settler’ colonies. Despite these changes, the academic culture and networks spanning the British world illuminated in Pietsch’s study were influential in shaping modern academic institutions and practices and secured long-lasting links that have endured into the present day.

Notes

1. In particular G. B. Magee and A. S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 2010); Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2005); Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820–2000* (Oxford, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See for instance Barbara Bush ‘Colonial research and the social sciences at the end of empire: the West Indian Social Survey, 1944–57’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 41, 3 (2013), 451–74.[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author thanks the reviewer and does not wish to comment further.

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