

The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900

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Miles Taylor

Duncan Bell's book comes with an intriguing picture on its front cover: Gustave Doré's famous 1860 depiction of a New Zealander perched on a broken arch of London Bridge sketching the ruins of St Paul's and its environs. The image, derived from an essay by Thomas Babington Macaulay, captures much of the Victorian premonition and anxiety about empire. Schooled on the classics and hardened in the tropics, successive generations of colonial statesmen and commentators in the 19th century learned to hope for little and fear much worse from the possession of far-flung dominion and settlement. Their ultimate nightmare was that the fate of Rome would catch up with Britain, that is, unbridled expansion overseas would precipitate the collapse of civilisation at the metropole. So fashionable had this Gibboneseque trope of 'Macaulay's New Zealander' become by the 1860s that, according to David Skilton, the satirical magazine *Punch* called for a proclamation banning its use, along with other proverbial phrases such as 'the Thin End of the Wedge' and 'the British Lion'. As arresting as Doré's lithograph is, it does seem a slightly odd choice for Duncan Bell's study, which is devoted to a series of Victorian writers and thinkers who developed a wholly positive vision of empire, looking forward to global peace and order, rather than back to the gloomy lessons of the past. No such problems are presented by the back cover. Gathered there are a series of top scholarly names from both sides of the Atlantic endorsing the book, which has been eagerly anticipated. Derived from his Cambridge PhD thesis of 2004, and trailed in a series of articles and edited collections, *The Idea of Greater Britain* is one the first major studies of Victorian intellectual life with the subject of the British empire left in, rather than out. Joint winner of the coveted Royal Historical Society's Whitfield Prize, singled out for praise by Stephen Howe in the *Independent*, and already frequently cited in new work in the field, it is not just the cover, but the contents of this book, which demand to be noticed.

The book is both monograph and manifesto. Bell's main research task is to resuscitate the somewhat neglected arguments of those Victorians who idealised and proselytised a 'Greater Britain', that is a closer union of Britain and the settlement colonies. But there is a larger purpose too. Bell calls for historians of political thought in the 19th century to follow their fellow scholars in earlier periods and take empire seriously. He contends that the Victorian canon of thinkers – so skilfully analysed by, among others, John Burrow, Stefan Collini and Peter Clarke – has escaped the sort of closer scrutiny which the imperial turn has inspired in intellectual history especially of the 17th and 18th centuries (for example, in the work of Anthony Pagden and David Armitage). By themselves, these two stated purposes are reasonable enough. Although the 'Greater Britain' tendency in the 19th century has not been entirely obscured – as Bell generously notes, Ged Martin, Michael Burgess and John Kendle have all written about it extensively – it has tended to be treated as an annex of imperial and commonwealth history rather than part of the main body of the Victorian vision. Moreover, its proponents – Thomas Carlyle, E. A. Freeman and J. A. Froude to name a few – have been seen at best as armchair statesmen, and at worst, pedlars of Anglo-Saxon racism. There is also a case for seeing them as misguided romantics, about which Jonathan Mendilow, not cited by Bell, has written. It is good to have the revisionist case put so forcefully, as Bell does so well. And the grander project is welcome too. Whilst 19th-century intellectual historians have not shied away from looking at the connections between India and Victorian political thought (e.g. both James and John Stuart Mill, and Henry Maine), the conceptual place of empire has not been considered in the same way as other Victorian concerns and shibboleths such as liberty, democracy, poverty, the state, or the economy. It is as if, to paraphrase Sir John Seeley, one of the heroes of this study, the British empire was acquired in a fit of absence of thought. Both Bell's case-study of the Greater Britain movement and his wider claims about the limited horizons of Victorian political thought as a discipline are thus worth considering seriously, separately and in more detail. There is much to commend with both, although there are legitimate concerns about how far the case-study of Greater Britain can really be used to open up new vistas in the intellectual history of the Victorian era.

Unsurprisingly, given his Cambridge provenance, Bell takes a 'meaning and context' approach to the idea of 'Greater Britain'. Instead of separating out Sir John Seeley and his forebears as belonging to a tradition of imperial and commonwealth historiography in which they pass the baton onto later scholars such as A. B. Keith and W. K. Hancock and eventually to the modern era revolutionised by Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, Bell places them and their preoccupations back in the mid-19th century. This has certain advantages. It becomes clear, for example, that faith in white empire overseas grew out of concern over the

dangers and perils of democracy at home. The aftermath of the 1848 revolutions, Liberal 'little Englander' calls for less colonies not more in the 1860s, and an expanded franchise and the advent of socialism in the 1880s all led to an upsurge in support for settlement empire as an antidote. Alongside this, the perception of Britain's geopolitical vulnerability across a globe increasingly dominated by Russian, French and then American and German expansion – all states with federal or imperial structures – stimulated what Bell calls 'one of the most audacious political projects of modern times' (p. 11), that is, a global Anglo-Saxon polity. There is obviously something to this: in the 1880s in particular, as other historians have shown, Liberal Unionism and radical Conservatism in Britain veered off in an imperial direction, specifically over the prospect of Irish home rule, but with many of these wider worries in the background. However, Bell does tend to apply his background strokes with such a broad brush, giving us a sense of the spirit of the times, without offering specific evidence of links between particular texts and the immediate events which surrounded their composition. Sometimes the texts are taken from the beginning of the period under study, sometimes at the end. The effect for this reviewer was to be less convinced by the 'meaning and context' approach than is usually the case.

It is helpful too, to see advocates for Greater Britain as engaged in a debate with each other, rather than with posterity – and this is another advantage of the contextual approach adopted by Bell. Between the publication of Goldwin Smith's 'Empire' letters in the *Daily News* in 1862–3, through Charles Dilke's *Greater Britain* in 1868, to Seeley's *Expansion of England* of 1883 and JA Froude's *Oceana* of 1886, we have a remarkably rich and diverse conversation over two decades on the shape of empire. Into the mix Bell adds the rise and fall of the Imperial Federation League (IFL, est.1884), and a host of minor publicists and enthusiasts, all taking part in an intense moment of heightened interest in white dominion overseas. In a nuanced manner, Bell shows a range of positions adopted. Some were for the racial union of Anglo-Saxon peoples pure and simple, or *pur sang* certainly, some defined nationhood in terms of culture and religion. Others were 'scientific utopians', fuelled by a techno-triumphalist belief that the contraction of 'time and space' through the telegraph and the steam-ship was making possible the creation of a union of non-contiguous states. Some, albeit in the minority, went as far as to envisage India included in the vision. For Bell, the impact of this debate is unquestionable. It was a 'pressing topic' (p. 18) and a 'popular rallying cry' (p. 31). Such claims are difficult to confirm or contest, for we are offered no reliable means of quantifying the impact of the movement, for example, through measuring the incidence of the phrase 'Greater Britain' in the newspapers and periodicals of the period, or in *Hansard's* parliamentary debates, or at election time. The principal thinkers discussed came straight out of the standard liberal canon of Victorian public moralists, and it is their influence as opinion-makers more generally rather than advocates of empire that is undeniable. At times, Bell himself doesn't seem totally convinced of their impact. In the introduction we are told that his case-studies were 'not sophisticated' thinkers and lacked the 'philosophical skills' (p. 21) required to turn people's minds, that the IFL was not 'taken seriously' (p. 15) by politicians (except Lord Rosebery, who although later Prime Minister was not always very serious), and that the movement was not really 'representative' of wider attitudes (p. 26).

Perhaps one way out of this gulf between Bell's expansive claims for his topic, and his more cautious conclusions about the impact of 'Greater Britain' would have been to widen his range of reference beyond the Anglo-centric thinkers and activists discussed here. British radicals and later on socialists do not feature very much, although historians have always been (sometimes uncomfortably so) aware of their pro-pax Britannica sentiments. Those caught up in the industry of white settlement: agents, advertisers and speculators – that culture of 'boosterism' about which James Belich has written so persuasively – might have been discussed in this book. And the idealists who imagined 'Greater Britain' – the red-pen wielding cartographers, statisticians, explorers and geographers – merited mention. Moreover, the neo-British world features very little. It cannot have escaped Bell's attention that some of the most eloquent and influential advocates of 'Greater Britain' were not to be found in the metropole, but in Canada, the Cape, Australasia, and even India. This broader context for analysing the promotion and reception of ideas about imperial union might have helped answer more fully the question of movement's impact. The book could profitably have been less about the canon, and more about the idea.

If Bell is somewhat contradictory and elusive on context, he proves much more sure-footed on meaning. At the core of the book are three excellent case-studies – of Seeley, Goldwin Smith, and (though at less length) of Froude. Here the description becomes much thicker. On Seeley, Bell follows others in rooting the Regius Professor's expanded notion of English identity in his liberal Anglicanism. But he also makes clear in ways others have not the Hegelian and anti-Napoleonic idea of a 'cosmopolitan nationalism' in Seeley's work – anti-imperial in intent, imperial in effect. Seeley was 'Greater Britain's' great catch – W. T. Stead thought he should be put in charge of a college teaching the value of a global British identity. However, the movement was never faraway from easily misunderstood (especially by posterity) Anglo-Saxon supremacist discourse, with which Goldwin Smith increasingly became associated. Bell shows how Goldwin Smith was critical of schemes for formal constitutional union – and in that sense was a leading radical little Englander and later pro-Boer – insisting that 'Greater Britain' be based on 'blood and sentiment', and for such reasons could not include India and Ireland, which were fit only for vice-regal institutions. Froude only gets passing coverage, but interestingly allows Bell to develop the point that a work such as *Oceana* might be seen as a late flowering of the 'civic humanist' tradition, with the scheme of imperial federation as a rearticulation of the classical republican community – albeit with a monarch at its head. Here some consideration might have been given to statesmen out in the field such as the 4th Earl of Carnarvon or Sir Henry Bartle Frere who both in India and southern Africa proved strong proponents of systems of federation, including non-European representation. Indeed, Bell does not really tell us enough about what practical form 'Greater Britain' might have taken. He notes at length the inability of imperial enthusiasts to adopt a sufficiently persuasive language and recognises how the sovereignty of Westminster might be imperilled by federal government. Nonetheless, schemes for imperial parliaments with colonial representatives (either in the Commons, or more commonly by the end of the century, in the Lords) as well as a more active imperial monarchy, were frequently advanced during the period, and were worth noting more.

Towards the end of this ambitious book, Bell returns to the scenario depicted by Macaulay's New Zealander, and argues that over the course of the 19th century, advocates of 'Greater Britain' became less haunted by the fate of classical empires. Instead, they looked to north America (in Goldwin Smith's case, he of course ended up there). With its waspish credentials, and never-ending frontier, America offered a fantasy of a future Anglo-Saxon yeomanwealth. Again, there is evidence for and against which he might have been discussed further. Not all of his generation followed James Bryce in seeing America as the new commonwealth. Many liberals opposed American new imperialism in Cuba and the Philippines, were not wholly supportive of westwards expansion, and did not welcome the corporate turn in American capitalism. For all that, however, via the Round Table movement after 1902 and the Cliveden set between the wars this aspiration helped forged the Anglo-American special relationship, and it is fitting that Bell closes his bold but not always convincing account with the goal of global federation passing to the continent where it has remained ever since.

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