

Replenishing the Earth. The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939

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Breakfasting in bed, Maynard Keynes recalled the immense scope of the *laissez-faire* world of the Pax Britannica at its zenith in the summer of 1914. 'The inhabitant of London could order by telephone, sipping his tea ... the various products of the whole earth, in such quantities as he might see fit, and reasonably expect their early delivery at his doorstep; he could ... adventure his wealth in the natural resources and new enterprises of any quarter of the world, and share, without exertion or even trouble, in their prospective fruits and advantages'.⁽¹⁾ And so he continued: the wide world responded, almost frictionlessly, to the needs of London at the centre of a web of commerce and influence, without apparent limit.

In August 1914 the world was on the brink of disaster and Keynes spelled out its subsequent economic chaos. It seemed to terminate the unprecedented cumulative expansion of trade and economic progress set going 15 decades before. Since the 1780s a larger proportion of the entire planet had been galvanised by forces and agents emanating out of Europe, in the service of England in particular. The recumbent Keynes celebrated this astonishing change but also marked its growing fragility and the problems it now faced in sustaining 'the economic progress of man'. Keynes himself believed that the continued growth and welfare of Europe was contingent on further territorial expansion: by the 1920s he was decidedly pessimistic about the larger project.

The dynamism and instability of the extended 19th century remains a great historical 'mystery', as James Belich occasionally concedes in his captivating new survey (pp. 2, 133, 339). It was, he says, essentially an Anglo-American phenomenon, a diasporic expansion that transformed the world system. Dynamic and

intrinsically volatile forces were set loose in three continents which were largely re-constituted into 'New Lands', connected together in a dominant 'Anglo-World'. The Anglophone elements 'diverged' and stretched ahead of their rivals; the British and the Americans, despite latent animosities, became 'an organic unity' (p. 51) which drove change across the globe. The originating agencies were hordes of settlers, especially those leaving the British Isles after about 1820, the human propellants of revolutionary change. In a narrative bulging with superlatives, Belich wants to re-write the way we think about empire, about progress, and about the mechanics of economic and political change in this world. It is an uncommonly ambitious and argumentative enterprise, a book of magnificent scale and range of scholarship. It is also self-consciously iconoclastic, full of assertion and splendid insights. The reader is driven along by an author urgent to persuade, always cajoling backsliders into line. In essence he attempts to explain why the British were the most 'eruptive' of people in the 19th century, why they were different, and with what consequences.

Belich launches his grand excursion with the extremely rapid growth of two cities in the mid/late 19th century, namely Chicago and Melbourne. They stand as exemplars of the 'explosive' growth typical in the first stages of settlement in Anglo-American 'New Lands'. Their growth was frenetic, frenzied and reckless. This kind of 'eruptive' increase, he asserts, was unfailingly replicated across the 'Anglo-World' and characterised by headlong and highly unstable expansion which always reached breaking point – followed by collapse and then (mostly) revival in a new, but different, phase of 're-growth'. Belich searches for a vocabulary powerful enough to capture this protean energy, and invents terms which sometimes stretch to hyperbolic excess. His favourite adjective is 'explosive' to describe the great 'divergence' by which the Anglo-world outpaced the rest of humanity after 1820. This was 'the progress industry' (p. 414), a culture of 'boom mentalities', of a collective hysteria of expansion (p. 202), a 'full frothing boom frenzy' (p. 558). In justification he supplies a massive compendium of examples of sudden growth (and sudden collapse) from across the 19th century 'Anglo-World', from Kansas to Kanmantoo, from Alaska to Auckland. He plunders a vast literature to illustrate the careering progress of their expansion, their dynamic, and their fluctuations and disasters.

In Belich's scenario all the expansions and the collapses (and their recoveries) were wild and spectacular. He concentrates on the *sturm und drang* of the 19th-century expansionism of colonial and frontier life. His narrative is designed to accentuate the drama and is replete with strong metaphorical imagery and rhetorical effect. It makes for lively reading, with rarely a dull moment. The drama, he claims, is not adequately captured in existing historical accounts (p. 183). This is indeed large-scale historical speculation by a self-styled 'generalist' (p. 289), fearlessly hounding errant specialists (economists in particular). Such comparative international history is the sort of territory traversed by the likes of William H. McNeill, E. L. Jones, Braudel, John Darwin, and Geoffrey Blainey. Belich works on a similarly wide canvass, employing a grand synthesis to investigate the differential performance of certain nations which expanded into the New Worlds. He wants to know how the world worked: he seeks its structures and mechanisms rather than the surface phenomena (although he deals with plenty of these too). His ambition is exhilarating and he sets off speculations and hypotheses that would require dozens of doctoral theses to test.

'The Anglo-Explosion' of English-speaking peoples was expressed most vividly in the eruption of their mushroom cities in a world dominated by 'Anglo-America' which persisted deep into the 20th century. It was more significant than imperialism itself: 'It did reach further and last longer than empire' (p 23). The Anglos emerged decisively ahead of their rivals from whom they 'diverged' after 1783. Exactly why they succeeded is the first big historical question set by Belich and he places the thrusting energy of settlers at the heart of the main account. The sheer velocity, scale, turbulence and, sometimes, the violence of the settlers enabled them to push relentlessly into new territories (occupied or not) in the Americas, Australasia, Africa, and later into Siberia. Frenzies of expansion are at the core of his account (p. 558) and settlers went forth on such a scale that they swamped local indigenes and snapped all resistance. Europeans were foremost, the British most of all. Moreover there was a great discontinuity in the chronicle – this is the 'Settler Transition' after 1815–20 when emigration reached 'mass' proportions, became hugely more attractive and saleable to millions of people, some of them carrying decent amounts of capital. Though essentially volatile, 'Settlerism' became a new historical variable in its own right. The settlers were the motor-force, and

responsible for their own successes and failures, as well as the 'vectors' of wider influences.

Partly the 'transition' is to be explained by better technologies of 'mass transfer', but Belich claims also that a new 'collective psychology' of migration had swept over the 'Old Lands', urging people outwards with extraordinary efficiency. It was a spreading attitudinal change which overcame 'the almighty wretch' of emigration (p. 133), 'a tidal shift' (p. 148) in the attractiveness of emigration. This alteration in the inner mentality of millions of prospective migrants is, perhaps, the most intriguing and mystifying of all Belich's sorties into broad historical explanation. Moreover, in the act and experience of transit, the migrants were themselves transmogrified into even more potent agents of change (pp. 510–1). It was a change 'inside people's heads' which then became a 'shared ideology of a vast mass of people', a new 'discourse of emigration' which he re-brands as 'Settlerism' (pp. 159–61). And it was promoted by a flood of bolstering propaganda which he quotes unstintingly.

Replenishing the Earth is especially convincing regarding the 'jerkiness' of the expansion, the spasmodic upheavals of settler energy which were directed and re-directed across the Anglo-world at different times and in characteristic spurts lasting 15–20 years. Belich argues that the success of British colonialism derived from the manner in which it incorporated disparate elements, such as the Scots, the Irish and Germans, more successfully than its rivals. He talks loosely of the virtues of 'hybridity' and the 'leavening' of the British host (pp. 42, 59). It created diversities and cultural mixes beneficial to the broad enterprise of the 'AngloWorld'. Most of all it generated a 'boom mentality' (p. 200).

Belich advances a theory of how settler economies grow, collapse and regenerate, a process set going by the frenzied initial inflows. This is not easily summarised since he is attempting to explain widely separated settlement surges, the system itself, in its totality. He identifies 'settlerism' as a spontaneous, erratic, unpredictable yet repeated impulse manifested across the migrant worlds. He divides the colonising world into Old and New lands, which allows him to re-categorise earlier colonies (such as New England) as 'Old Lands' and new territories such as the Old West, Manitoba and New Zealand as 'New Lands' with a repeated experience of frenzy and fall. They shift and change and make up expanding spheres with reconstituted interconnections across continents and oceans (pp. 82–3). Of these surges, Belich scoffs at explanations employing market mechanisms. He repeatedly mocks the notion that settlers were responding to price stimuli: it is a common historical 'fallacy' to think that they were searching for export staples (p. 277). He insists that the timing is all wrong and that other engines of advance were at work.

Belich is not the first writer to chronicle the runaway course of capitalist economies through their cycles of growth and purgation. But he writes with élan and provides small mountains of contemporary description of the excesses of speculation and the pain of the busts. Surprisingly he makes little reference to the best known financial madneses, the South Sea Bubble of 1720 and the Great Crash of 1929. Staple exports, he repeats, were not the driving force in 'settler booms' – growth created exports rather than the other way around (p. 415). There is evidently a chicken-and-egg problem in this exposition, but Belich asserts that 'explosive colonization was driven as much by dreams as by reason' (p. 288).

In place of the market, Belich believes that the settlers generated their own growth during the bursts of expansion in the 'Anglo-New Lands'. The key activity in these 'exploding' societies was trade between, and among, the settlers, who were 'supplying the local market in the service of growth itself' (p. 277). Echoing the ideas of Jane Jacobs, he tells us that the settlers 'were their own best customers'; cities such as Seattle 'simply spent themselves into existence', he contends (p. 398). This was self-generating expansion, growth causing growth, and before the onset of any export-led development (p. 87). It produced what he calls 'a precocious -industrial flowering' (p. 90). The problem is that the idea of 'growth leading to growth' smacks of tautology.

These 'Anglo-Booms' (p. 86) of frantic development were typically about two decades in duration and Belich produces a welter of staggering growth rates, best exemplified in the American 'New Lands' of the West. He invokes a recurring 'boom mentality' which induced economic expansion as revolutionary as the 'industrial revolution' (p. 119). It produced 'history's most rapid form of societal reproduction', driven by

unconstrained speculation, egged on by boosterism and wild investment which was associated with other recurrent patterns of social behaviour (including enhanced crime rates and heavier drinking). It worked in spasms and was its own engine, not simply a response to export opportunities. And thus Belich decries all theories related to export-oriented growth (associated with, for instance, the ideas of D. C. North and other staple economists). Wool in eastern Australia, cotton in the American South, cattle in the West, gold in many places (p. 393) – all these were decidedly *not* the primary determinants of growth. Rather they were the products of ‘settlerism’ which somehow induced its own expansion (see p. 306). Staples did not start booms and did not stop them either (p. 338). He reverses the common causal sequence (p. 415). Economic theory, he declares, is simply not up to the task of explaining the sudden and erratic character of settlement booms.

In Belich’s account, settler surges and growth somehow spirited themselves into life. The Old Northwest had the highest growth rates in human history (p. 229), but it was its own engine. And the juggernaut of ‘settlerism’ swept away all resistance in its path, most notably any indigenes in the way. But after the boom came the inescapable bust – and there is plenty of evidence of such collapses across the colonising world. The ‘escape’ from these collapses almost always took the form of an export-led recovery and a reintegration into the global trading system. This became, for instance, the role of beef production for New York and London, wool for their textile industries, New Zealand dairy produce for the late Victorians. In the process of recovery the ‘New Lands’ found themselves re-engaged with the Old World. The ‘rescue package’ entailed a reconstruction of the connections with centres of the ‘Old Lands’ and by implication, a renewal of previous economic dependency. *Voilà*, Belich presents ‘Re-colonisation’ which sounds suspiciously like a relabelling of ‘recovery’, a tendency for settlements to become informally reintegrated with the old centres, back into the ‘imperial’ fold. The Dominions somehow replace the United States as the destination for Anglo expansion from 1900 onwards. Moreover ‘Re-colonisation’ encompassed territories beyond the Anglo-World, including Uruguay and Argentina. Towards the end of his account Belich roves the wider world to identify further zones also ‘re-colonised’, including French Algeria, Manchuria, and Brazil – territories which become ‘adopted Dominions’ receiving foreign investment, and tied to London and New York by trade (as though a form of tribute to the old centres) and absorbed within the idea of ‘Greater Britainism’, as well as ‘Greater America’ too.

In essence Belich’s project is a colourful and challenging version of economic history, *sans* graphs and formulae, but packed with miscellaneous statistics and descriptions of booms, busts and recoveries which are at the heart of his global system. This is scarcely new territory: it has engaged generations of economists and historians, most of all analysts of business- and long-cycles, notably Kondratieff, Schumpeter and Kuznets, as well as migration historians such as J. G. Williamson, and Brinley Thomas; and there are echoes of W. W. Rostow in Belich’s version of the story. Belich indeed employs the idea of ‘take-off’ in several places (pp. 99, 268) but rejects the notion of leading sectors at all times. Belich chafes against the received views which rely on market forces for their basic explanation (p. 364). He is openly combative throughout and will deserve a reaction.

His dismissal of leading-sector theory is provocative. He does not allow enough for the common fact that initial colonisation is necessarily speculative, exploratory and reconnoitring. The first steps in settlement, by definition, required investment in basic infrastructure, ports, services, imported machinery in advance of marketable production. Such set-up requirements were bound to produce import levels greater than exports at the start (pp.520-2). Many proto-settlements failed where subsistence was difficult and export sectors unforthcoming. First settlements were usually devoted to establishing the foundations of a productive export-seeking society. They were not normally transplanted peasant societies; they always had aspirations well beyond subsistence; they were outliers of the capitalist societies which they had left; they sought a progressive division of labour, and they reconnoitred export possibilities from the start. The immediate needs of pioneers created a local division of labour and were almost inevitably attended by inflation and debt. But this does not detract from the reality that settlers generally look beyond simple subsistence towards larger commercial trading possibilities as a pathway to the sort of wealth upon which their emigration was commonly predicated. Staple industries required backward and forward linkages which were part of their range of influence. Sometimes, of course, the entire enterprise failed, but there were dozens of success

stories which, in the great trading world of the early 19th century, created demonstration effects for endless further rounds of migration. Moreover it is not surprising that economies recovered from depression by way of export markets as their main saviour, as the engine of renewed growth. Economies generally adjusted and recovered after busts by lowered costs and renewed competitive edge in local and export markets. This indeed was the conventional trading context for the bouts of growth which produced Keynes' happy breakfast tables, before and after 1914.

Belich protests that he has no wish to force the entire Anglo-world within a Procrustean bed (p. 551). Indeed he provides immense variety in his account which is full of rich and arcane detail. It is a highly original and idiosyncratic panorama and its best achievement is its juxtaposing of the disparate elements in the settler system so that we see the simultaneity and comparability of expansion and contraction, for example, in South Australia and Ohio in the 1830s, in Otago and California in the 1860s, West Australia and Oregon later, and so on. The range of his speculations is breath-taking – thus he talks about bankruptcies stretching from the Old West to New Zealand, from Kansas to Melbourne, all in the compass of a couple of paragraphs. He constructs the beginnings of a new coherent narrative of the entire world of settlement. Most of all he gives proper emphasis to emigration as a business enterprise, huge in scale and highly volatile, decisively responsive to the new opportunities and, possibly, a changing psychology of migration. He makes the vital point that the permanency of new settlement depended crucially on the female proportion within the incoming population (pp. 30–2, 60); this also related to the youthfulness of the migrating populations, often a teenage phenomenon in the 19th century: thus only 5 per cent of Illinois' population in 1830 was over the age of 40 (p. 203). He is bracingly sceptical of conventional measures of growth, sharply dismissive of *per capita* statistics as seriously misleading. Belich is also stimulating on technical detail – for instance, the change in handling in the grain trade from sacks to elevators; and the intricacies of the beef and pork supplies for big cities. The whole account radiates an unstoppable curiosity with fascinating juxtapositions such as Belich's comparison of the numbers involved in the gold rushes with those absorbed in the armies of the superpowers (p. 306). He loves shifting the perspective, searching for answers to rarely asked big questions.

Replenishing the Earth exudes confidence but the author openly concedes that there are central mysteries scattered throughout his long account. Often the key causal sequences are wrapped in metaphor: we are offered 'vectors of mass transfer'; there is much 'cloning' at work; there are 'spasms of globalisation', high 'combustibility' and 'moments of ignition'; 'gold-tipped ice-bergs', exports as 'life-rafts', 'dehydrated technologies', a 'five million ton bridge' of trade, and many more Belichisms which enliven the historical dramatics. Settlement is the key to his schema and he argues that emigration lost its fears in a psychological transition after the French Wars. But the originating impulses remain obscure and Belich decries standard arguments and even the notion that land hunger and the quest for independence were critical. Another historian of seminal ideas, Bernard Bailyn, also wrote in rich metaphors to capture the drama of equally momentous shifts in the Atlantic World, a little earlier than Belich's 'divergence'. Bailyn invoked structural, tectonic movements across the oceanic system which somehow caused populations to move intercontinentally between the parts of the Atlantic. This was 'the centrifugal *Völkerwanderungen*' that transformed the Western Hemisphere at the end of the 18th century.⁽²⁾ Belich is operating on a similar scale.

Surprisingly Malthus features little in either Bailyn or Belich – yet behind all the revolutionary demography of the 'New Lands' was the population revolution in the 'Old Lands', most of all in the British Isles. The critical moment of the migrant 'transition' identified by Belich coincided with the fastest phase of population growth in modern European history. It was also in these years that spectacular, indeed 'explosive', urban growth overwhelmed newly industrialising Britain. It is impossible to believe that what happened in the metropole was not generating expansion on the edges of Belich's 'New Lands'. The connections between the homeland and mass emigration are still unresolved. It is most likely that the germinal roots of these massive shifts of humanity will be found, not so much in the spread and convergence of the outward migrants, but at the very sources of these people, often in the back lanes and villages of England, people following barely understood impulses which caused them to become the motor force driving the 'settler transition'. This may well be the critical *desideratum* of Belich's global speculations –

that is, a return to the soil, and to the reproductive behaviour, of the pre-industrial people, especially in the British Isles. We know much more about the mechanisms of transfer and their consequences than about their root causes.

Belich's method scours the literatures and reconceptualises the narrative of western expansions, within and beyond the Anglo-Worlds, repeatedly applying new labels to well known phenomena. The account is replete with vivid and telling components of the boom story and the collapses – such as the mad destruction of the bison, the assault on timber forests, the fate of the ostrich, and all here in intoxicating detail. Most of all he heaps up evidence across more than a century of extreme expansionary and contracting economic behaviour which has the advantage of bringing authentic drama and excitement to the story. It inevitably detracts from the gradual, tedious, cumulative and often laborious business of conquering the land and creating the cities, the quiet life beyond the booms where generations of occupiers indeed 'replenished the earth' and made the foundation of the new worlds. Belich is wonderfully sceptical of most other efforts to explain the velocity and turbulence of the 19th century expansion. His own method is essentially descriptive, piling up data, leavened by high octane metaphors and clotted superlatives, and occasionally falling back on historical 'magic' (e.g. p. 202). His own explanations, almost certainly, will not satisfy the white-coated economists who will find most of his hypotheses unverifiable at their required level of rigour. But he places the migration of millions of people at the centre of the question of how the modern world has been made, and of these people we need to know much more.

Replenishing the Earth possesses grandeur of vision. It is written with great gusto in a vigorous quest for explanations of vital phenomena. It is exhilarating and provocative reading and grapples with central historical questions at a structural level which leaves this reader cheering its sheer bravado.

Notes

1. J. M. Keynes, 'The economic consequences of the peace', in *Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes* (Vol. 2, London, 1971), pp. 6–7. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America* (New York, 1986), p. 4. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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