



The bisected roots of imperial history:

Settler world projects and the making of a field in modern Britain, 1883-1912

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Abstract

This article examines two early episodes in the institutionalization of imperial history in modern Britain. The two issues under study are John Seeley's motivations for publishing the *Expansion of England* in 1883, and the Anglo-Saxonist agenda behind the creation of the Beit Chair at Oxford in 1905. The institutionalization of imperial history was a process marked by concerted efforts to theoretically divide the empire into its component parts, and to promote the unity of diasporic Greater Britain over the affairs of India and the dependencies. I also look ahead to the halting integration of the dependent empire into "imperial studies" after 1912. These findings put current "settler world" scholarship into conversation with previous work on the empire of rule, and suggest new avenues for studying the British empire as a system of intellectual, as well as economic and social, flux and contention.

Résumé

Cet article étudie deux aspects de l'institutionnalisation de l'histoire impériale en Grande-Bretagne. L'article examine en détail les motivations de John Seeley lorsqu'il publia *Expansion of England* en 1883, puis les présupposés en faveur d'une perspective « anglo-saxonne » sur l'empire qui ont présidé à la création de la Chaire Beit à Oxford en 1905. Ce processus d'institutionnalisation est marqué par une volonté délibérée de distinguer au sein de l'empire diverses parties constitutives et de promouvoir la diaspora britannique au détriment de l'Inde et des autres colonies. L'auteur analyse également l'intégration partielle des colonies autres qu'« anglo-saxonnes » au sein des études impériales après 1912. L'article permet de placer dans une perspective critique les recherches actuelles sur les colonies de peuplement blanc, de les faire entrer en dialogue avec les travaux

antérieurs sur les autres territoires dirigés par les Britanniques et d'envisager l'empire britannique comme un territoire fluide et contesté sur le plan intellectuel, économique et social.

Biographical notice of the author

Amanda Behm is a doctoral candidate in history at Yale University. Her dissertation explores competing visions of the British empire in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain through their impact on the development of imperial history as an academic field and theoretical pursuit.

Notice biographique de l'auteur

Amanda Behm est étudiante en thèse dans le département d'Histoire à l'Université de Yale. Ses travaux portant sur les visions rivales de l'empire britannique de la fin du XIXe au XXe siècle en Grande-Bretagne. Elle s'intéresse en particulier à l'impact qu'a eu le développement de l'histoire impériale comme champ disciplinaire et comme objet théorique.

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British authors have been writing histories of overseas lands and peoples for centuries—intellectual contact that accompanied commercial, settlement and military ventures. A vast panorama could include authors from Richard Hakluyt in the sixteenth century, through the East India Company or Anglo-Bengali historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth, through James Mill's *History of British India* in the early nineteenth century.¹ However, only in the late nineteenth century did Britain produce the phenomenon we might call imperial history: the systematic study and writing of the history of Britain's overseas possessions and satellite states, taking into account all parts of the empire so as to influence policies for the future using the lessons of the past. Earlier generations had produced histories about the Americas, or India, or the Far East; after the middle of the nineteenth century, prominent metropolitan scholars took the whole of the British world system as their subject. The present article is concerned with this development: the emergence of imperial history in Britain as an academic field and theoretical pursuit, and its specific uses in different institutions.

In the 1860s and 1870s, scholars confronted the task of writing for a wider democratic public, and lecturing to university students who, for the first time, were being educated specifically in modern history.² But that said, the history of the British empire, as such, did not find a place in Britain's historical curriculum until the first decade of the twentieth century. In fact, the development of the field followed a surprisingly inconsistent trajectory. Imperial or colonial history was championed by influential leaders in Britain but often rejected within academic spaces. It started, unsteadily, as a vehicle to promote a vision of a white diasporic empire. It then persisted in this vein until just before the Great War, when scholars and campaigners began to plot methods of studying the imperial past that encompassed the so-called dependent empire. By the interwar

¹ Richard Hakluyt, *The Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 3 vols., London, 1598-1600; Peter C. Mancall, *Hakluyt's Promise: An Elizabethan's Obsession for an English America*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2007; William Jones, "On Asiatic History, Civil and Natural" [1793] in *Discourses Delivered before the Asiatic Society and Miscellaneous Papers on the Religion, Poetry, Literature, Etc. of the Nations of India*, London, Charles. S. Arnold, 1824, p. 17-35; James Mill, *The History of British India*, 3 vols., London, Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1817.; Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, 2 vols., London, John Murray, 1817.

² On the ascent of modern history as an independent subject in English universities, see Reba Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History & the Making of an English Elite 1870-1930*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1994. For the moral outreach efforts of Victorian intellectuals and the rise of the university as an arena for British political thinking in the late-nineteenth century, see Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, esp. p. 1-59, 201-225.

years, imperial history, as both academic subject and public conversation, was integrating the political and racial inequalities of the British world system under one constitutional rubric. Why did this happen, with what consequences for both the historical profession and the political thought behind decolonization in the mid-twentieth century?

As it stands, no scholars have addressed head-on the question of why imperial history emerged. Many have ignored the problem, or taken it for granted as yet another sign of a general expansionist will. Conventional wisdom holds that British politicians, journalists and scholars feared France and Russia, and were beginning to notice their nation's decline relative to the United States and Germany. Imperial history-writing engaged this geopolitical anxiety and justified overseas dominion. In most accounts, the founding myth remains largely the same. In 1883, John Robert Seeley published his recent series of lectures on *The Expansion of England*, and from that point on, newly anointed historical experts staked their careers, in and beyond the universities, on answering the pressing colonial questions of the time.³

Yet even if they agree on a starting point, historians have not asked why imperial history exploded, or lagged, or took root in certain institutions in Britain, at specific moments from the later days of Victoria's reign onward. Links emerged between scholarship and political debate even before the "Seeleyan moment" of the 1880s, through the foundation of chairs of colonial or imperial history in Oxford, London and Cambridge between 1905 and the 1930s. Proposals and plans for empire studies corresponded with political confrontations that both catalyzed and drew upon historical argument; influential policymakers pursued careers that spanned academia and government. Out of these events, a crucial pattern appeared early on: rival imperialist ideologies sought a common reference in constitutionalism privileging the diasporic empire. This analytic domain provided an uneasy shared space for activists who, despite their differences, agreed that the empire of white settlement was the most important object of British overseas policy. Leading historical theorists of the imperial system would open the field to consider problems of the "dependent" world only after 1912, a shift that this article considers in its conclusion.

Studying the trajectory of imperial history provides an opportunity to examine imperialism as a fluid and often contradictory set of visions, in a particular time and political context. It also contributes to a larger discussion about the development of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. However, there is another, more urgent consequence. As current imperial scholarship moves away from the view of conquest imperialism as a pervasive, all-powerful mode for explaining the British past—

³ Wm. Roger Louis, "Introduction" in Robin Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Vol. V: Historiography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 8-11; J. G. Greenlee, "'A Succession of Seeleys': The 'Old School' Re-examined", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 4, 3 (1976), p. 266-82; Ronald Robinson, "Oxford in Imperial Historiography", in Frederick Madden and D. K. Fieldhouse (eds.), *Oxford and the Idea of Commonwealth: Essays Presented to Sir Edgar William*, London, Croom Helm, 1982, p. 32-5.

as well as from the rebuttal that the empire mattered very, very little to Britain⁴— it has taken up a different empire and set of historical dynamics: the “settler world” explosion. The new emphasis among imperial scholars is on diasporic Britain and the relationships and networks formed amongst the British colonies of settlement and the metropole. A number of scholars who have participated in this turn include Duncan Bell, James Belich, Carl Bridge, Philip Buckner, John Darwin, Kent Fedorowich, Tony Hopkins, Alan Lester, and Andrew Thompson. To an extent, all react against what they see as the relative neglect of the white settler, or diasporic colonies in the last two generations of imperial historiography.⁵ Most of these historians have tried to redress the situation by emphasizing the development of the settler world itself, or the economic structures, networks and ideologies linking specific settler colonies to Britain. A few, namely Thompson, Darwin, Hopkins and Fedorowich, operate on a more systemic level, trying to reroute studies of empire and decolonization away from the metropole-periphery analytic frame to one that recognizes a “British world”— and one that still embraces Britain.

Some of the most influential scholars in the field have based key work on the observation that Britain’s white empire has been underserved by modern imperial historiography. Yet, they give very little scrutiny to the background behind that neglect. Nearly all tip their hats to John Pocock’s “Plea for a New Subject”, the 1975 article in which Pocock petitioned British historians to re-conceive of British history as the history of the British diaspora, as Seeley had done.⁶ Moreover, many of these scholars of the *British World* point out that older imperial historiography, from works by Charles Dilke to John Seeley to the interwar *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, did not neglect the white dominions.⁷ Therefore, that older historiography serves implicitly as a lens worth re-creating, if not necessarily for its normative purchase, at the very least as a precedent for re-opening the field of settler empire studies.

⁴ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁵ Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: empire and the future of world order, 1860-1900*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007; James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the anglo-world, 1780-1930*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009; Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, “Mapping the British World” in Bridge and Fedorowich (eds.), *The British World: diaspora, culture, identity*, London, Frank Cass, 2003, p. 1-15; Philip Buckner, “Introduction: Canada and the British Empire” in *Canada and the British Empire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 1-21; John Darwin, *The Empire Project: the rise and fall of the British world system*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; A. G. Hopkins, “Rethinking decolonization”, *Past and Present*, 200, 1 (2008), p. 211-247; Alan Lester, *Imperial networks: creating identities in nineteenth-century South Africa and Britain*, London, Routledge, 2001; Andrew S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain: the empire in British politics, c. 1880-1932*, London, Longman, 2000, esp. p. x-xi.

⁶ J. G. A. Pocock, “British history: a plea for a new subject”, *Journal of Modern History*, 47, 4 (1975), p. 601-621; Richard Bourke, “Pocock and the Presuppositions of the New British History”, *The Historical Journal*, 53, 3 (2010), p. 747-70.

⁷ Bridge and Fedorowich compare the “new” imperial history to masterworks of the 1920s and 30s largely devoted to the dominions, such as the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* or W. K. Hancock’s *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, and “the great nineteenth-century foundation works of imperial history written by Sir Charles Dilke and Sir John Seeley.” “Introduction”, p. 1. See also Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*, p. 23n.

This approach has two fundamental flaws. Those “foundation works” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were motivated by specific political and theoretical projects. The historical study of Greater Britain was key to movements such as imperial federation, Unionism, South African reconstruction and tariff reform. India, most of British Africa, and other dependencies were marginalized in this study. Therefore, by ignoring this background to Victorian and Edwardian history-making, today’s historians run the risk of flattening the conflicted career of imperial history into a tale of shifting moods. More importantly, this approach threatens to obscure a more complete history of the British empire, which puts the components of that empire in conceptual relation. The political systems and ideas affecting the lives of metropolitan Britons, dependent populations and white settlers alike existed in dynamic tension and competition with each other. This relationship was transacted through intellectual and informational, as well as economic, markets—an arena for scholarship that yet has been left largely unexplored. Andrew Thompson and Gary Magee have taken one step toward such a model in their recent study of the “British world economy”, by positing that ethnic and ideological commitments, as well as settler networks, influenced economic behavior that in turn led to uneven globalization and the increasing exclusion of non-white groups from the protection and privileges of Britishness. But while Thompson and Magee convincingly explore the effects of migration, investment and remittances in making the British world economy, the bulk of their analysis only gestures at the ideological factors underpinning such behavior.⁸

An opportunity has emerged to explore the history of ideas and politics that brought the models of empire-as-settlement and empire-as-rule or empire-as-civilizing-mission into contact with each other. By taking imperial history as a subject in its own right, we might document the process through which metropolitan thinkers and activists weighed imperial priorities through the practice of history: how they explained the uneven development of the empire, and how they promoted fields of study as well as policy change to steer Britain and the empire toward their envisioned ends. The contributions of imperial federationists, tariff reformers and “constructive imperialists” have been downplayed in later historical scholarship because they failed to push through many of the projects they championed.⁹ However, the impact of their work and debates can be traced more productively in the method through which subsequent generations used to explain the imperial past—that of constitutional evolution and parliamentary institutions as the requirements for self-government.

Looking at the emergence of imperial history in Britain, two early episodes illuminate the relationship between the new field and a wider British World project. The first case is that of John Robert Seeley, his publication of the *Expansion of England* in 1883, and his influence and its limitations as both Regius Professor of Modern History at

⁸ Andrew S. Thompson and Gary Magee, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁹ As Thompson points out. See his “Imperial Ideology in Edwardian Britain” in Andrea Bosco and Alex May, eds., *The Round Table, The Empire/Commonwealth and British Foreign Policy*, London, Lothian Foundation Press, 1997, p. 14.

Cambridge and as a popular author. The second case— the first step in the actual institutionalization of imperial history— is the foundation of the Beit Chair of Colonial History at Oxford University in 1905. Imperial history, in these two early disciplinary incarnations, developed as the story of the spread of British populations, which sought to elevate the affairs of self-governing colonies above questions of “alien” rule. The distinction between Britain’s so-called colonies of settlement and its Asian and African territories underpinned the work of both Seeley and the team behind the creation of the Beit professorship. Seeley’s hugely popular book, the *Expansion of England*, carved up the “British empire” writ large into the empire of English settlement and the empire of India. This bisection, perfectly frozen in the two-part structure of the lectures, was fundamental to Seeley’s goals, as we will see. Twenty years later, the first Beit Professor, Hugh Egerton, carried this division, between the empire of settlement and the empire of alien rule, into academic structure. The continuity had two bases. First, Seeley and likeminded commentators had established the parameters for imperial history in the late-Victorian era: the Empire was not one, but in fact several. The colonies of settlement represented the most profitable subject of study in Britain’s overseas world. Second, by the first decade of the twentieth century, imperial politics in Britain, as well as disciplinary trends in academic history, converged to carve out a space for explicitly “colonial” history at Oxford. The Beit Chair rode in on a tide of debates over imperial unity which pitted imperialist against imperialist— almost all of whom, despite their differences, professed their ultimate concern to be the survival and success of a settler-populated Greater Britain. Insofar as other imperial problems aroused argument in this sphere around 1904-5, India was largely sidelined;¹⁰ Africa aroused public interest only in specific cases, and Ireland was trapped in a parliamentary limbo.¹¹ The recent crisis in Southern Africa, on the other hand, was very much in the headlines. The Boer War, and reconstruction, left a tortured legacy not just for South Africans, but for the British architects of South African policy. These men, led initially by Alfred Milner, saw their task as the reconciliation of British and Boer populations within a British-dominated state, by means that included subverting native rights and controlling Asian labour flows.¹² As it fate would have it, it was this group that also designed the colonial history program at Oxford. Beset by controversy at home as well as in South Africa, they turned to a mythic and loosely homogenous British world as their guiding ideal on both fronts. And so, by 1905, imperial history— in its disciplinary incarnation, and as the vanguard of

¹⁰ Thompson, *Imperial Britain*, p. 34-35.

¹¹ Compared to the Conservative and Unionist “accent on the imperial implications of Home Rule” in the late-1880s, public debate about imperial and domestic order engaged a relatively different set of topics following the Boer War and launch of Joseph Chamberlain’s tariff reform campaign. On the issue of Home Rule in party political conflict after 1886, see E. H. H. Green, *Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Ideology and Economics of the British Conservative Party, 1880-1914*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 62-63, 68-69, 76.

¹² Saul Dubow, “Imagining the New South Africa in the Era of Reconstruction” in Andrew S. Thompson and David Omissi (eds.), *The impact of the South African War*, pp. 76-80 and “Colonial Nationalism, The Milner Kindergarten and the Rise of ‘South Africanism’, 1902-10”, *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1997), p. 53-86.

empire studies in Britain— was effectively the history of white, Anglo-Saxon, colonial settlements and their relation to British policy. It was founded on the premise of difference from, and superiority to, other kinds of empire which existed, and some might argue prevailed, in the British world.

John Seeley and the historical configuration of Greater Britain

Seeley had been Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge for fourteen years when he published the *Expansion of England* in 1883. The book emerged from a series of lectures Seeley had given to Cambridge undergraduates the year before. The root of the work itself can be located in Seeley's imperial federalist outlook and commitment to activism through history-writing, a worldview that was deeply informed by Seeley's Liberal Anglicanism and tenuous engagement with positivism early in his career. He looked for the sacred and the miraculous, and proof of a Christian god's plan, within quantifiable human experience. To this end, he pursued throughout his career a "political religion" which could explain and exalt the natural dynamics of community on both national and universal scales.¹³ In the *Expansion of England*, Seeley was doing two things. One was to make the colonial empire, or Greater Britain, an object for active study and policymaking in a revitalized English educational system aimed to cultivate "mind and character" to spread downward from leaders to the people.¹⁴ The second was to explain where the colonial empire fit into the divine plan, even one that apparently included rule over alien populations and an inorganic state in India.¹⁵

Seeley waged his campaign against what he perceived as general apathy toward the colonial empire, and against so-called anti-imperialists such as Goldwin Smith who insisted that Canada and Australia would inevitably separate from the mother country, and who accused imperialists of failing to understand the obstacles presented by the sheer fact of the empire's political diversity.¹⁶ Seeley sought to stake out the field of modern history itself for the cause of imperial union. The basic message he gave to Cambridge undergraduates was that history should "pursue a practical object... to set us thinking about the future and divining the destiny that is reserved for us." History was a science for revealing England's fate. From that premise, the expansion of the English state was

¹³ Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*, p. 153-55, 161; Deborah Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, esp. Chapters 4 and 6; Teodoro Tagliaferri, "Legitimizing British Colonial Authority: Greater Britain and India in the Historical Vision of John R. Seeley", The Production of Colonial Historiography Workshop, Frankfurt, 5 October 2010.

¹⁴ Seeley, "Our Insular Ignorance", *Nineteenth Century*, 18 (1885), p. 862. Quoted in Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*, p. 163 and Peter J. Cain, "Empire and the Languages of Character and Virtue in Later Victorian and Edwardian Britain", *Modern Intellectual History*, 4, 2 (2007), p. 260-61.

¹⁵ Seeley defined "organic" and "inorganic" states in his *Introduction to Political Science: Two Courses of Lectures*, ed. Henry Sidgwick, London, Macmillan, 1923 [1896], esp. p. 73-74.

¹⁶ Goldwin Smith, *The Empire: A Series of Letters Published in 'The Daily News,' 1862, 1863*, Oxford, John Henry and James Parker, 1863.

the single most important theme of modern history.¹⁷ The proper object of study, produced by this expansion, was Greater Britain: “the state or political community which has its seat in England.... the great governed society of English people,” consisting of, besides the United Kingdom: Canada, the West Indies, Southern Africa and Australasia.¹⁸ The Celtic fringe, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, simply had been subsumed within the English state. Great Britain came about with effective Britannic union in the seventeenth century, and Greater Britain spread through continuous overseas movement.

In establishing the history of expansion as the key to *English* history, it might seem that Seeley stumbled over what he saw as the most un-English of imperial holdings. For lack of a more convenient taxonomy, Seeley included in his definition of Greater Britain one anomaly, “a fifth great territory also subject to the Crown and ruled by English officials, but inhabited ... by a completely foreign race.”¹⁹ But this concession was strategic, for Seeley then spent the second half of his book trying to compartmentalize and explain away India. The manoeuvre was central to Seeley’s conception of the British empire. The segregation of India defined the mode that he considered appropriate to imperial politics by means of contrast.

In both his lectures and his book, Seeley struck a stark and adamant division between the forces of development in the self-governing colonies, against what he believed to be stagnation in India. However, he worried initially about taking his interpretation of India public. He wrote to his publisher Macmillan in September 1882: “As to your sending the MS to the Printer’s at once, the proposal makes me nervous. I have not yet positively made up my mind to publish it at all. ... I think I should like to get some Indian authority to read over the later lectures.”²⁰ Ultimately, although Indian material remained, it was an item Seeley preferred to shelve in the long run. Seeley was proud of the blaze of publicity that his book brought to the notion of Greater Britain. In 1894, Seeley himself suggested the production of a cheap popular edition of the *Expansion* include only the material on the white colonies, and not India, telling Macmillan that Lord Rosebery and others were asking for a new edition. But, to quote Seeley: “I notice that all these persons speak only of the first half of the book; they are thinking of the Colonies, not of India. And the Headmaster of Marlborough, telling me the other day that he had found the book produced a very rousing effect upon his boys, added expressly that he had not confused them with the Indian part.”²¹

Why did Seeley engage British India in the 1882 lectures in the first place, if he felt himself to be on shaky ground, and if his abiding didactic interest was the empire of

¹⁷ In the *Expansion*, Seeley repeatedly referred to “England” as the founding polity of Greater Britain. Only later in his career did he begin to invoke “Britain” as the seat of the wider British world. Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History*, p. 154-180; Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures*, London, Macmillan, 1883, p. 1-3.

¹⁸ Seeley, *Expansion*, p. 7-8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁰ Seeley to Alexander Macmillan, 6 September 1882, Macmillan Archives, Add. MS 55074, ff. 24-5, British Library.

²¹ Seeley to Macmillan, 20 December and 7 February [1894], Macmillan Archives, Add. MS 55074, ff. 43-4, 47-8.

settlement? All of this might seem a puzzle until we remember Seeley's goal to distinguish the rationale for imperial federation from a crude celebration of empire in all its forms. Again, Seeley had positioned himself against arguments championed by Goldwin Smith. When Smith then reviewed the *Expansion of England*, he not only continued to protest that the colonies would never join in a British political union; he flatly denied Seeley the credit of distinguishing true imperialism from rule in India.²² Seeley could only shrug this off by agreeing with Rosebery that the book had fallen into the hands of an "old wretch".²³ But then, away from the national spotlight, Seeley's position at Cambridge required him to take a stand on the fissures growing in the empire. The university took a prominent role in the recruitment and education of Indian Civil servants, and, in the same year Seeley lectured to undergraduates on the expansion of England, the history and law faculties had been choked by controversy over the appointment of a new Indian History lecturer. The candidate in question was a former Indian Army officer and amateur religious theorist highly critical of post-Mutiny government policy in India. This appointment led Henry Sumner Maine, then Master of Trinity Hall, to complain to one of Seeley's friends in the history faculty on behalf of the University. Maine was a former legal member for the Governor-General's council in India and his objection captured a substantial dilemma. The new lecturer, he said, represented a small and peculiar group who thought the British empire in India should be abandoned. Maine asked,

... what greater harm could we do to the [entering] civilians than to tell them that the entire system which they have to apply is radically wrong and undeserving of their labour? It is much as though this university, having undertaken to educate some Irish students and propose to have them better instructed in Irish history (which, like Indian history, requires much solid and special knowledge), should select Parnell as Irish historical lecturer.²⁴

Seeley tried to mediate this problem. He told Cambridge undergraduates, and then the reading public, exactly how an entire system could be wrong, yet still deserve British labour. Britain had only been drawn into India by commercial competition with France. And while the French might have put the whole affair in motion, India had never really been conquered; it had conquered itself long ago, prostrated by religious, racial and linguistic divisions. And so Seeley devoted the second half of the *Expansion* to explaining that India did not exist in the same temporal, political or moral space as the rest of Greater Britain. In Seeley's own words, "When we inquire then into the Greater

²² Goldwin Smith, "The Expansion of England", *Contemporary Review*, 45 (1884), p. 524-40.

²³ J. R. Seeley to Mary Seeley, 28 March 1885, Seeley papers, MS903/2A/1, Senate House Library, University of London.

²⁴ Henry Sumner Maine to Oscar Browning, 21 September 1881, Browning papers, OB/1/1043, King's College Library, Cambridge.

Britain of the future we ought to think much more of our Colonial than of our Indian Empire.... India is all past and, I may almost say, no future. ... The dominion of England in India is rather the empire of the modern world over the medieval ... The same nation which reaches one hand towards the future of the globe and assumes the position of mediator between Europe and the New World, stretches the other hand towards the remotest past....”²⁵ It was absurd to think of India as a nation, Seeley said; but should English rule ever awaken nationalist sentiment, at “that moment we should recognize perforce the impossibility of retaining her.”²⁶ So why keep up the game, in 1882? Seeley deferred to a higher power on that question. The spread of light was “the greatest function any Government can ever be called upon to discharge. ...as time passes it rather appears that we are in the hands of a Providence which is greater than all statesmanship... that the Indian achievement of England as it is the strangest, may after all turn out to be the greatest, of all her achievements.”²⁷ Much as he envisioned England, then, Seeley saw himself as mediator: one hand pointing to the consolidation of Greater Britain as the most important object of the future; one hand reaching back to theorize and stabilize the reality of inorganic rule in India, so that British statesmen might someday pry themselves out from the gap between ideal and antithesis into which they had fallen. This was Seeley’s attempt to reconcile the vast political and economic inequalities of India in the British world with his conception of the divine nature of the state.

In the end, Seeley’s views on the Indian empire were ambivalent at best. He emphasized the strange dignity of the British mission in India while still opening up the vista of an untainted English future. Further, he excluded contemporary Ireland from the historical panorama, and would later combine his campaigning for imperial federation with aggressive opposition to Home Rule after the crisis of 1886. Home Rule was the antithesis of Seeley’s conception of the lessons of history: politics was not about accommodating ancient grudges through constitutional tinkering, but rather discerning the higher purpose behind permanent English government.²⁸ It’s worth noting as well, Seeley gave his lectures four years after Britain annexed the Transvaal, and published them one year after the occupation of Egypt. The Scramble for Africa was unfolding while readers snatched up copies of his bestseller; and yet the *Expansion* gave no mention, let alone justification, of British activity in north or tropical Africa aside from a brief discussion the slave trade.

While Seeley served as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge from 1869 until 1895, and emerged as celebrity spokesman for the historical study of empire in 1883, Seeley’s contribution was not the foundation stone of imperial history in Britain

²⁵ Seeley, *Expansion*, p. 11, 175-6, 244.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 252-3.

²⁸ Seeley was a driving force in organizing Cambridge Liberal Unionists. As he berated Oscar Browning: “...a Gladstonian Home Ruler is at the opposite pole from me! To me he is one who has renounced all that is most certain and elementary in politics.” Seeley to Oscar Browning, 6 April 1887, Browning Papers, OB/1/1455/A. Also quoted in Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History*, p. 173. See also J. A. Hort to Seeley, 24 June 1886, Seeley Papers, MS903/1B/18.

that many scholars have assumed it to be. In his inaugural lecture, Seeley had vowed to campaign for the full recognition of history as an academic subject, and stressed the value of modern history for current and aspiring political practitioners.²⁹ Yet, in the longer term, we see Seeley created no lasting institution for expressly “imperial” history at Cambridge, despite serving as Regius Professor for twenty-five years. His campaign to incorporate political science in the history curriculum was only partially successful, with setbacks in the reforms of 1885. Further, the tenure of Seeley’s successor, Lord Acton, saw a backlash against Seeley within the Faculty regarding the definition of political science, and a reemphasis on teaching history as a subject in its own right, independent of political science or economics.³⁰ During these debates, Seeley’s very name became a point of friction. As one Cambridge economist warned Oscar Browning, a long-suffering supporter of Seeley’s in 1896, mentions of the former Regius Professor would “set peoples backs up... They know Seeley's views; & don't want to hear so much of them.”³¹

Of course, Seeley’s public legacy fared better. His vision of Greater Britain reached countless late-Victorians— it became “a household book and a household phrase” in the well-known appraisal of Oxford historian and educationist H. A. L. Fisher.³² Though Seeley displayed only a limited capacity to reform the intellectual life of Cambridge, institutionalized imperial history could have materialized at the time of his death in 1895. The Seeley Memorial Committee considered the option of commemorating the late professor through a colonial lectureship at Cambridge. But Seeley’s circle of supporters had neither the financial resources nor the popularity to push through a scheme even so modest as an essay prize.³³ Cambridge got a library renamed after Seeley.³⁴ Oxford, instead, got imperial history.

The Beit Chair and the stakes of colonial history, c.1905

Seeley provided a generation with convenient truths that proponents of the settler imperialism put to use in later academic circumstances: “how our Colonies are really an Expansion of the English State; how the revolt of the American Colonies was due to special circumstances, which do not apply to our present Colonies, and how we have entered into an age in which it will be both expedient and possible to draw our Colonies closer to us.” These views underpinned the second case study in this paper, the Beit Chair

²⁹ The Cambridge Historical Tripos was established in 1873. Seeley, “The Teaching of Politics:-- An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Cambridge“ in *Lectures and Essays*, London, Macmillan, 1870, p. 291-317

³⁰ Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History*, p. 131.

³¹ Alfred Marshall to Oscar Browning, 19 January 1896, Browning papers, OB/1/1062/C; minutes of meetings of the Board of Historical Studies, October-November 1895 [esp. 19 November 1895], records of the Faculty of History, HIST/1/1/3, Cambridge University Library.

³² H. A. L. Fisher, “Sir John Seeley”, *Fortnightly Review*, 60 (1896), p. 183.

³³ J. R. Tanner to Oscar Browning, 31 May 1895, Browning papers, OB/1/607A.

³⁴ The greater portion of the Seeley Memorial Fund went to the library of the Cambridge History Faculty. Established in 1807, the library was renamed after Seeley in 1897.

of Colonial History at Oxford.³⁵ The Beit Chair was founded in 1905, twenty-two years after the appearance of the *Expansion of England*, and ten years after Seeley's death. Times had changed: the settler empire had grown exponentially through trade and emigration, as well as annexation and conquest, in the 1880s and 1890s.³⁶ Australian and Canadian relations with Britain were simultaneously prominent and strained; South Africa was the new hinge of Britain's imperial fate.³⁷

The Beit Chair of Colonial History took root at a moment of pitched activism by self-professed imperialists then engrossed amongst themselves in debates over defence, trade, emigration and national fitness. It owed its creation to the anxious efforts of imperial promoters such as Leo Amery, Alfred Milner and Alfred Beit, who imagined themselves to be counteracting the tendency toward ignorance of the empire, even apathy, in Britain and particularly at Oxford. But the course was not smooth. Despite these ambitions, it soon became clear that colonial history initially missed the mark. Rather than tapping a wider will to "think Imperially,"³⁸ the new field drew little student interest. Course attendance hovered between four and ten students in the first seven years, with "a considerable leakage" from the twenty who sometimes ventured out at the start of terms. The first Beit Professor, Hugh Egerton, proved an ineffectual program-builder.³⁹ By 1912, even the sympathetic Regius Professor of Modern History despaired of ways to promote the fledgling field.⁴⁰

Why did the study of colonial history at Edwardian Oxford— at the supposed height of British imperialist fervor, in the academic cradle of prime ministers and viceroys— suffer such a rocky start? The interests behind the creation of the Beit professorship sought to establish white settler empire as the dominant focus of imperial history, much as had Seeley. However, the commercially and defensively sealed, self-sufficient, and nominally homogeneous racial community they promoted was just one of several competing visions of the imperial future then vying for dominance in Britain. Competition between these views heightened the stakes of studying diasporic Britain, and

³⁵ Fisher, "Sir John Seeley", p. 183. Fisher would also serve as an elector for the Beit Chair in 1905.

³⁶ Thompson and Magee, *Empire and Globalisation*, introduction.

³⁷ Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 217-54.

³⁸ "The foundation of the Beit professorship gives Oxford a great opportunity," declared the *Times* as applications were solicited for the post. "[Our] young Englishmen... must be educated Imperially if they are to think Imperially. That was the aim of Mr. Rhodes's foundation, and it is also the object of Mr. Beit's." The leader writer referred to the Rhodes Scholarships that had been inaugurated at Oxford for select male students from the self-governing colonies and the West Indies, United States and Germany in 1903 under the terms of Cecil Rhodes's will. *Times*, 13 October 1905.

³⁹ W. L. Grant [Beit Lecturer], report of work done during lectureship [1910] and H. E. Egerton, report on the progress of the Beit Chair, February 1912, Beit Trust minute book, University of Oxford. Also quoted in Deborah Lavin, "Lionel Curtis and the Idea of Commonwealth" in Madden and Fieldhouse, eds., *Oxford and the idea of Commonwealth*, p. 106.

⁴⁰ In his ongoing struggle to break the stranglehold of traditionalists in the History School, Charles Harding Firth suggested the claims of colonial history be advanced by slipping sources for the faltering field into existing constitutional reading lists and an expanded "political" subfield. Modern History minutes, 2 February 1912, FA 4/11/1/3, Oxford University Archives.

claiming expert knowledge of its historical development.⁴¹ However, self-professed imperialists were deeply divided in the years following the Boer War. One group encompassed advocates of imperial preference who shared a commitment to fiscal centralization and strengthening Greater Britain as a racial state for military and social reform purposes. That state, and the loyalty of its citizens, were the supreme objects of their historical views.⁴² Against this vision, older Gladstonian Liberals and radicals maintained their commitment to laissez faire and free exchange with the settler colonies.⁴³ Another wide set, comprised of many younger figures, looked for the consolidation of Greater Britain, but through either constitutional means or naval defence coordination, and not through tariffs.⁴⁴ All of these groups focused on the British world as the object of their advocacy and policymaking. While some imperialists recognized the importance of the dependencies and Britain's so-called "civilizing" mission, they protested what they saw as excessive mainstream concern with the self-governing colonies, and remained largely uninvolved in the main controversies that linked metropolitan politics, economics and academia in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁴⁵

In the end, the figures at the forefront of both self-professed imperialist politics and imperial history-making were predominantly concerned with the empire of settlement. Here, the tariff-reforming imperialists shared common ground with free-traders interested in constitutional reform and innovation. They believed the vast "coloured" empire was either an encumbrance or a secondary policy consideration to the more pressing question of relations between Britain and the self-governing empire.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Thompson, "Imperial Ideology in Edwardian Britain", p. 1-23; Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*, esp. p. 194-206.

⁴² Thompson describes this imperialism as embracing "a neo-Hegelian view of the state as a creative and dynamic agency which had a key role to play in the Empire's consolidation," particularly through trade reform. Green observes that "race loyalty" was fundamental to the tariff reform conception of imperial relations. Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*, p. 200-1; Thompson, "Imperial Ideology in Edwardian Britain", p. 1-23.

⁴³ Peter Cain, "Radicalism, Gladstone, and the liberal critique of Disraelian 'imperialism'" in Duncan Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 215-239.

⁴⁴ They generally eschewed fiscal mechanisms, or the taint of profit and business, in their plans for imperial unity. Members of the constitutional or summit-oriented camp, including Lionel Curtis, John Buchan and Philip Kerr, tended to hail from Oxford and particularly from service in South Africa under Milner, who himself aimed to transcend the fiscal rivalry. Milner to Violet Markham, 24 June 1906, Markham papers, Markham 25/56, British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, London School of Economics. See also Buchan to Amery, 25 July 1903, Amery papers, AMEL 1/1/14, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.

⁴⁵ Flora Shaw Lugard, "The Tropics and the Empire" in Charles Sydney Goldman, ed., *The Empire and the Century*, London, John Murray, 1905, p. 818-9; Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, *Ancient and Modern Imperialism*, New York, NY, Longmans, Green, & Co., 1910, p. 15-6. One notable exception was Winston Churchill, who, among his multifaceted and views on the empire at large, consistently embraced the prospects of rule over subject populations over the course of his long career. Richard Toye, *Churchill's Empire: the world that made him and the world he made*, London, Henry Holt & Co., 2010, p. 89-121; Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption and Civil Society in Modern Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 166-67.

⁴⁶ J. L. Garvin, "The Maintenance of Empire: A Study of the Economic Basis of Political Power" and L. S. Amery, "Imperial Defence and National Policy" in Goldman, ed., *The Empire and The Century*, p. 72, 184.

India might be required for economic and defense purposes; but when it came to the immediate needs of imperial policy, as well as the teaching of history, the forward school of imperialists were, in the 1900s, loath to look beyond the dominions. A Seeleyan rhetoric of temporal disjuncture and inorganic rule echoed in their statements. Preparing for the Colonial Conference of 1907, Milner himself would explain the event's neglect of the dependent empire:

... the position of India and the other dependencies... and their relations to Great Britain are not in question on this occasion. We may lose them or retain them, but we can never retain them as anything but the dependencies. With regard to the self-governing Colonies, on the other hand.... Whatever the future has in store, whether our destiny is closer union or separation, things cannot long go on as they are.⁴⁷

The antecedent problem for imperialist politics in the first decade of the twentieth century was demarcating the empire of settlement and its problems from the dependent empire, which would allow colonial and metropolitan representatives to debate the particulars of the imperial connection in a discrete frame. This problem underlay the early existence of the Beit Chair.

The Beit program personified an exclusive historical focus on the development of British diasporic communities. I am not alone in noting this fact. In Richard Drayton's view, the first Beit professor set down a "Whig history of British Imperialism," turning imperial history into an iteration of the study of the English constitution and the progress of English liberty.⁴⁸ This observation must go further. The true significance of the Beit Chair's inception lay in activism and reaction. The fate of the first professor, and the rocky course the program weathered, revealed the ill-fit between the purpose of the Beit gift, Oxford's intellectual infrastructure and the confused calls for action on a national level. By documenting and explaining these dynamics, we can better understand the specific vision of Anglo-Saxon empire promoted by a certain group associated with both South Africa and Oxford around 1905, and its legacy.

The discipline's academic genesis came at the urging of a group dominated by Leo Amery, Alfred Beit and Alfred Milner— two Oxford men, one financier, all three deeply concerned with controlling relations between metropolitan Britain and colonial South Africa. In their vision, the field of colonial history was as an institution, a citadel in which to train a generation that had seen the demise of the organized imperial federation movement, the rise of naval competition with Germany and the United States, and the

⁴⁷ Alfred Milner, "Some Reflection on the Coming Conference", *National Review*, April 1907, p 193-206.

⁴⁸ Or, as Ronald Robinson judged more dismissively, Egerton's work on policy and federations was merely derivative of Seeley's study of the "organic" white empire which so "defined the infant subject." Richard Drayton, *Imperial and Commonwealth History: A Genealogy*, Oxford, [private publication], 1997, p. 6-8; Robinson, "Oxford in Imperial Historiography", p. 32-5.

clash within Britain as well as between Britons and Boers in the South African War.⁴⁹ The main inspiration for a colonial history apparatus came from the rapid materialization of the Rhodes Scholarship program, which brought young men from the colonies, the United States and Germany together at Oxford to strengthen the sentimental professional and political ties of an emerging Anglo-Saxon world state.⁵⁰ Joseph Chamberlain's controversial campaign for tariff reform, launched in 1903, provided an additional but crucial context for the Beit endowment.

Colonial history bore the stamp of one contending imperialist camp from its inception. Leo Amery thought up the scheme, and in late spring 1904 proposed the idea to Alfred Beit, who in turn offered Oxford University an endowment for the teaching of colonial history. Amery was then an iconoclastic young lawyer, journalist, aspiring Unionist politician and fellow of All Souls, who had come up as an undergraduate at Balliol College in the generation just behind Milner. Balliol, along with New College, served as the cradle of British idealism, a school of thought which emphasized the role of the state as the guarantor of human development, and the locus of every individual's loyalty and personal striving.⁵¹ Amery was deeply affected by this conception, and, more than many of his contemporaries, made the creation of an ethnically and economically unified imperial state the supreme focus of a very long career.⁵²

By 1904, Amery was a strong proponent of both tariff reform and army reform; the *Times's* military correspondent during the Boer War soon became a central figure in the Compatriots' Club, an unofficial Conservative think-tank crusading against liberal economic "orthodoxy".⁵³ Amery believed that the factors of shared mindset, common interest and mutual trust amongst a corps were more important than rules and manuals in coordinating joint action. Therefore, he renounced constitutional solutions for uniting the empire, in favor of economic formulae and racial policies.⁵⁴ For that matter, Amery

⁴⁹ Alfred Milner to H. A. L. Fisher, 27 November 1905, Fisher papers, MS Fisher 59, Modern Manuscripts, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Reflecting this outlook, the first Beit Professor, Hugh Egerton, would later proclaim in 1910 that "Every school building is a citadel of Empire and every teacher its sentinel." Quoted in Richard Symonds, *Oxford and Empire: The Last Lost Cause?*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1986, p. 47, 53.

⁵⁰ L. S. Amery, *My Political Life, Volume I: England Before the Storm*, London, Hutchinson, 1953, p. 183. For the development of Rhodes's will and the thinking that informed it, see Colin Newbury, "Cecil Rhodes and the South African Connection: 'A Great Imperial University'?" in Madden and Fieldhouse (eds.), *Oxford and the Idea of Commonwealth*, pp. 75-96; Philip Ziegler, *Legacy: Cecil Rhodes, the Rhodes Trust and Rhodes Scholarships*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2008, esp. p. 1-43.

⁵¹ Sandra M. Den Otter, *British Idealism and Social Explanation: A Study in Late Victorian Thought*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, esp. p. 151-203; Jeanne Morefield, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 24-54.

⁵² Amery, *My Political Life*, p. 253.

⁵³ L. S. Amery (ed.), *The Times History of the War in South Africa, 1899-1902*, 7 vols., London, Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1899-1909; Amery, *Fundamental Fallacies of Free Trade: Four Addresses on the Logical Groundwork of the Free Trade Theory*, London, National Review, 1905; Wm. Roger Louis, *'In the Name of God, Go!': Leo Amery and the British Empire in the Age of Churchill*, New York, Norton, 1992, p. 19-21, Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*, p. 161-62.

⁵⁴ Amery to Milner, 20 February 1903, quoted in John Barnes, David Nicholson and Julian Amery (eds.), *The Leo Amery Diaries, Vol. 1: 1896-1929*, London, Hutchinson, 1980, p. 44; Amery, *My Political Life, Volume I*, p. 194-5.

wanted to split the existing British world into conceptual, political and legal halves. Only four months after landing on the scheme of a colonial history chair, Amery would write to Alfred Lyttelton, demanding that the Colonial Secretary bisect the empire along racial lines, to shore up unity between Britain and the settler colonies, and to manage the white backlash in Australia and South Africa against the immigration of Asian and Indian labor. He suggested creating a two-tiered system to “divide British subjects into at least two classes, (a) the full British citizen, and (b) the British subject.” The “old position that one British subject is as good as another” had to be given up, Amery maintained; only then would the “Colonies”— the crux of the imperial future— be content that “Asiatics” would present “no danger to the development of their civilization.”⁵⁵

Alfred Beit, the money behind the chair, was likewise swayed by Amery’s conception of the imperial past and future. Amery approached Beit at a “men’s dinner” in 1904, and had no trouble persuading the elder financier that the teaching of colonial history was one path toward their shared goals. Beit had been the business partner of Cecil Rhodes, and one of his closest confidantes in the development of British South Africa. Beit supported the concept of a British world protected by economic and racial regulations. He also championed education as a means of training elites to control and direct the forces of the age.⁵⁶

Amery and Beit’s project was important because it reflected a sweeping turn amongst late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British imperial activists toward the demands of self-governing colonies, or settler communities, in debates over race, immigration and citizenship. The late-Victorian and Edwardian eras saw a sea change in the public affairs of empire. The first generation established in Canada, Australia and New Zealand by heightened migration from Britain after the 1870s, increasingly lobbied British officialdom over issues such as defence, trade and labor policy. The presence of Asian migrants and laborers in the self-governing colonies “provoked powerful outbursts of exclusionary racial thinking... discriminatory treatment... and various forms of state immigration restriction and exclusion... across the settler-world in the later nineteenth century.”⁵⁷ Such dialogue gathered force during ministerial and civic brokering between

⁵⁵ Amery to Lyttelton, 30 August 1904, AMEL 2/5/3, Amery papers.

⁵⁶ This was Amery’s appraisal. Beit also brokered metropolitan influence on South African affairs, not least of all through postwar political payments from the Rhodes Trust to South African Liberals which were often remitted by Beit himself. Amery, *My Political Life*, 183; letters on “political expenditure,” esp. Bourchier Hawksley to Lewis Michell, [1903], and unsigned Photostat [Michell to Jameson, 1903], RT/1039, Rhodes Trust papers, Bodleian Library of African and Commonwealth Studies at Rhodes House, Oxford. For an overview of the work of the Rhodes-Beit Shares Fund, see Colin Newbury, “Cecil Rhodes and the South African Connection”, p. 87 and Anthony Kenny, “The Rhodes Trust and Its Administration”, pp. 6-10 in Kenny (ed.), *The History of the Rhodes Trust, 1902-1999*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁵⁷ The Edwardian years proved a period of tension between British and colonial governments, at the end of which the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act of 1914 “accepted that the Dominions could regulate immigration as they saw fit, even if this meant differentiating between different classes of imperial subject.” Despite the British government’s nominal policy of non-intervention, acts restricting Asian, “coloured” or “alien” immigration throughout the empire during this time included the Natal Acts of 1896-7, Australia’s 1901 Act, the Cape’s Immigration Restriction Act of 1902, and discriminatory measures

British and Boer leaders in postwar Southern Africa— problems which loomed large in Amery’s mind. Following the Peace of Vereeniging in May 1902, Milner and his coterie played a major role in formulating and promoting an ideology of “South Africanism,” a form of white nationalism which looked to appeal across wartime divides between Afrikaner and British populations to foster the so-called “reconstruction” process and create, for the first time, a unitary South African state. This end was pursued at the expense of South Asians and native Africans— imperial subjects now denied the rights of that status— in “the first ‘new South Africa’.”⁵⁸

The proposal for colonial history at Oxford was a product of this wider drive for racial exclusivity in the settler world. Therefore, the Beit Chair is best understood as an assertion of what Thompson and Magee have recently termed “Britishness,” the ideology that put an Anglo-sphere first in questions of imperial development.⁵⁹ But in this case, the event in question was the foundation of a permanent academic discipline in metropolitan Britain. It interacted with other traditions at Oxford, not the least of which was the rigorous study of the English constitution and aim to create “men of character,” steeped in a sense of civic duty.⁶⁰

Imperial politics confronted the established constitutionalism of the Oxford history school when Amery, Beit, and Milner took their plan for colonial history to the University. Modern history at Oxford was then dominated by the study of constitutional history, still centered around the former Regius Professor Stubbs’s *Select Charters* and the notion of the gradual development and entrenchment of English liberties.⁶¹ In this context, Amery proposed his new subject in reference to, and defiance of, constitutional history.

From the point of view of ordinary citizenship, the history and development of the Colonies is nowadays quite as important as the history of the development of our parliamentary institutions, and it is monstrous that at the present moment when there in no educated man, let alone history student, who does not know all about the Magna Charta, that there are practically none who know anything about the configuration of

taken by British Columbia from 1898-1908. Thompson Magee, *Empire and Globalisation*, p. 65-66, 72-3; Robert Huttenback, “‘No Strangers Within the Gates’: Attitudes and Policies Towards the Non-White Residents of the British Empire of Settlement”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1 (1972), p. 271-302; Thompson, *Imperial Britain*, p. 34-45.

⁵⁸ Saul Dubow, “Imagining the New South Africa in the Era of Reconstruction”, pp. 76-80 and “Colonial Nationalism, The Milner Kindergarten and the Rise of ‘South Africanism’, 1902-10”, pp. 53-86.

⁵⁹ Thompson and Magee, *Empire and Globalisation*, pp. 1-45, 65-6.

⁶⁰ Reba Soffer, “Nation, Duty, Character and Confidence: Modern History at Oxford, 1850-1914”, *Historical Journal*, 30, 1 (1987), pp. 77-81, 94-5; C. H. Firth, *A plea for the historical teaching of history: an inaugural lecture delivered on November 9, 1904*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1905. For the varied career of the idea of “character” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British political debate, see Collini, *Public Moralists*, pp. 91-114.

⁶¹ William Stubbs, *Select Charters and Other Illustration of English Constitutional History from the Earliest Times to the Reign of Edward I*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1870 and *The Constitutional History of England in its Origins and Development*, 3 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1873-1878.

Canada and, even worse, there is no one at present in Oxford qualified to teach on the subject.⁶²

On one hand, as a Balliol graduate, Amery could appreciate the intersection between the aims of idealism and the content of constitutional history. The Oxford modern history school, in particular, studied natural hierarchies as moderated by the subtleties of England's unwritten constitution. This motif corresponded, even if indirectly, with idealism's emphasis on citizenship which "implied a consciousness of the ends of human life as embodied within the institutional structures of a state" or "a consciousness of a common good."⁶³ On the other, Amery held that the documents of Canadian statecraft, from the Durham Report to legal confederation in 1867 were at least as important as the Magna Carta because they were the imperial rejoinders to what he saw as an insular island-story infecting the minds of the English elite. Imperial history was, in this sense, constitutional history yet to be written; it sought patterns of growth and federation that took into account only like communities and would result in a strong state at the heart of Greater Britain. Even if Amery saw the binding agents as sentiment and economic cooperation, he proposed the field in reference to constitutional topics because that language provided the clearest means of bringing the history of the self-governing colonies to Oxford. Talk of parliamentary institutions and configurations was, in this approach, a means of infiltrating the curriculum, not an end.

Colonial history was intended to accomplish singular work, in relation to the existing subjects offered in the Oxford history school: to provide an analytic focus on the self-governing empire and the United States. Among the conditions attached to Beit's offer for a permanent endowment for colonial history at Oxford were the following:

That the History of 'British Dominions over the Sea'... shall not include the History of India or its dependencies, but shall include the following subjects:-

- (a) The History of Imperial Policy towards British possessions,
- (b) The detailed History of the separate self-governing Colonies including the American Colonies before the Declaration of Independence,
- (c) The detailed History of all other British possessions-- past and present-- exclusive of India and its dependencies.⁶⁴

Here was a new formula understanding the spread of Anglo-Saxondom and ensuring its persistence. India and the dependencies were excluded from this history: the future lay with one kind of empire; the other empire was consigned to the margins.

And yet, the initial impact of the founding of the Beit Chair was subdued. Despite a high level of funding and support from an electoral committee that included Milner and the current Colonial Secretary, the program foundered in its first six years. The first Beit

⁶² Copy of Amery to Beit, n.d. [June 1904], Amery Papers, AMEL/2/5/3/1.

⁶³ David Boucher and Andrew Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 28-30. On the complementary relations between idealism and the social sciences, see Den Otter, *British Idealism and Social Explanation*.

⁶⁴ Alfred Beit to David Binning Monro, 27 June 1904, papers relating to the foundation of the Beit Trust for Colonial History, WPβ/11/12/1-9, Oxford University Archives.

professor was an electoral compromise. The committee chose the safest candidate, despite Amery's original vision, and despite Milner's reservations that the committee needed to search more widely.⁶⁵ Hugh Egerton, the winning candidate, offered credentials combining private scholarship with service in the Colonial Office as a longstanding campaigner for emigration to the settler colonies.⁶⁶ Egerton enjoyed an advantage over other leading candidates in that he claimed to study a field he himself identified as "colonial history."⁶⁷ Further, Egerton presented himself as non-controversial— meaning, by 1905, he had not taken sides in the tariff reform debate, nor had he spoken on South African issues. He was the paragon of the basic settler-world-view, in that he dismissed both politics and economics as the engines of imperial history. The only thing that mattered in his account of the British empire was an inherent English impulse toward "the occupation of overseas lands," and the support that the British government showed toward emigrants and colonial populations.⁶⁸ The goal of empire was the population of the world's waste spaces with the best stock of English descent possible. And, as we might expect, Egerton ignored the dependencies and India in his work. His one major book, *A Short History of British Colonial Policy*, resonated with the Beit electors as an appropriate manual to the new field.⁶⁹ It made no mention of the Indian subcontinent.⁷⁰ Egerton also avoided discussions of British political or commercial interventions in Africa, and when he examined the problem of slavery in the British West Indies, he did so out of condolence for the planters who had been misled, supposedly, during the sentimental play of emancipation.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Milner to Fisher, 27 November 1905, Fisher papers.

⁶⁶ J. G. Greenlee, "'A Succession of Seeleys'", pp. 266-82; Brian H. Fletcher, "Australian History: The Imperial Context 1880s-1939", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 40, 1 (1994), p. 1-2.

⁶⁷ Only a handful of self-identified colonial historians worked in Britain at the time, including Egerton's Colonial Office colleague and collaborator, Charles P. Lucas, J. A. Doyle, and the E. J. Payne (d. December 1904). Of these, only Egerton applied for the Beit Professorship.

⁶⁸ Egerton, *A Short History of British Colonial Policy*, London, Methuen & Co., 1897, p. 233.

⁶⁹ Milner, untitled notes on Beit candidates, [October 1905], Milner papers, MS Milner 32, Oxford University Modern Manuscripts; letters from George B. Adams, George L. Beer, Edward Channing and Charles Dilke in "Correspondence and papers relating to elections to University professorships: Beit Professorship of Colonial History (application of Hugh Edward Egerton only)", 1905, UR 12/25/1, Oxford University Archives.

⁷⁰ By contrast, Egerton raised the issue of India several times in his introduction to the revised edition of Lucas's *Historical geography*. See *The origin and growth of the English colonies and their system of government: an introduction to Sir C. P. Lucas's historical geography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1903. However, any mention of India entailed the caveat that India was not a colony but a "conquered dependency", and Europeans in India were too miniscule and temporary a minority to be considered colonists. Further, while Egerton published a well-researched biography of Stamford Raffles in the same year he produced *A Short History*, he did so only because the volume's original author, a Colonial Office colleague, was called to serve under Milner in South Africa. The conclusion emphasized Raffle's intent not to extend empire by conquest, but by commerce, and therefore British influence in Singapore could not be dismissed by "Critics who believe that the one object of the Builders of Greater Britain has been to paint the map of the world red". Egerton, *The origin and growth of the English colonies*, p. 3 and *Sir Stamford Raffles: England in the Far East*, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1897, p. 267.

⁷¹ Egerton, *A Short History*, p. 274-7, 329-30, 333, 405.

The problem with Egerton's appointment was that, as it turned out, he couldn't lecture. He was painfully insecure about his academic qualifications, and didn't demonstrate an ability to counter entrenched interests in the Oxford history faculty.⁷² Constitutional history, per the practice of the tutors, prevailed at Oxford through the first decade of the twentieth century.⁷³ Egerton tried to loosen its grip by editing a compilation of colonial constitutional documents of his own, to only limited success. Few students were drawn to colonial history.⁷⁴ In fact, until Egerton's retirement in 1919, his direction of the colonial history program passed uneventfully and with limited effect, as evidenced by condolences from his colleagues and later obituaries.⁷⁵ Moreover, those figures who might have been Egerton's patrons turned their interest elsewhere: while Egerton came out as steadfastly against factional politics in 1906, Amery and Milner were just beginning to embroil themselves in party conflicts, more than ever.⁷⁶

1906, after all had been a punishing year for British imperialists— at least, for those affiliated with Joseph Chamberlain and Milner, and even those Liberal Imperialists who felt they received little by way of a reward for their loyalty in lifting their party to office.⁷⁷ The Unionist party, by then divided for almost three years on the question of tariff reform, was swept out of office in January. Chamberlain, still the object of dwindling Unionist hopes for imperial deliverance, was removed from politics by a paralytic stroke in July. Figures associated with Milner's work in South Africa found themselves banished to the wilderness. Unionists, Liberal Unionists, Liberal Imperialists, all fell to arguing over the very definition and purpose of their nominally shared creed.

The founding of the Beit Chair of Colonial History at Oxford was but a whisper in this political tempest. Beit and Amery had intended to create a program through which the colonies were to be linked to Britain through educational schemes. Britain's stagnant universities were to be charged with extolling the gospel of empire, for the good of imperial center and outer worlds alike.⁷⁸ But this outcome was thwarted by university convention, lack of student interest, and a wider political clamor so boisterous that it

⁷² Egerton, report on the progress of the Beit Chair, [February 1912]; *Times*, 23 May 1927.

⁷³ C. H. Firth, "On the Desirability of Diminishing the Work Set for the Modern History School and in Particular the Amount of Early Constitutional History", Oxford, [private publication], 1909 in G. N. Clark papers, MS Clark 240, Bodleian Modern Manuscripts.

⁷⁴ Grant, report of work done during lectureship, and Egerton, report on the progress of the Beit Chair; Deborah Lavin, "Lionel Curtis and the Idea of Commonwealth", p. 106.

⁷⁵ A. L. Smith to H. E. Egerton, 30 September 1920, A. L. Smith papers, MS Smith E7, Balliol College Archives, Oxford; *Times*, 23 May 1927.

⁷⁶ Unfortunately for Egerton, he chose the moment of his election, late 1905, to issue a new edition of his celebrated book, complete with an epilogue blasting Chamberlain's tariff campaign as "dangerous." It is unclear whether the electoral committee had seen or discussed this new edition at the time of voting. Egerton, *A Short History of British Colonial Policy*, 2nd edn., London, Methuen & Co., 1905, p. 526-27.

⁷⁷ H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973; Milner to Markham, 31 March 1906 and 24 June 1906, Markham papers, Markham 25/56.

⁷⁸ John Buchan's fascinating contemporary fictional caricature emphasized "Eric Lowenstein's"—or rather, Beit's— interest in bringing about a "spiritual renaissance" through elite education. [John Buchan], *A Lodge in the Wilderness*, Edinburgh, William Blackwood and Sons, 1906, p. 306.

undermined the constructive power of any one ideology devoted to uniting Britain and the settler colonies.

Second drafts: from colonial history to imperial studies

The prevailing shape of imperial studies at Oxford —and beyond— would be much more politically engaged than the first iteration of the Beit program would suggest. Its main engine was the Round Table, the “brains trust” and sometime lobbying group which crystallized, in 1910, from the band of young Oxford men whom Milner had gathered around him in South Africa during the years of postwar reconstruction and constitution-building.⁷⁹ Almost to a man, they wrestled with the problem of divining the best mechanism for uniting the community of white Greater Britain. A few, like Amery, looked to fiscal union, but most, such as the “Prophet,” Lionel Curtis—a former undergraduate classicist at New College and stalwart of Milner’s group in South Africa—turned to constitutional means. It was Curtis who served as Beit Lecturer under Egerton in 1912, at the invitation of a Beit Trust committee looking to reinvigorate the program. Like other members of the Round Table, Curtis was interested in remaking the very fabric of imperial ties, by confronting fundamental political problems that Egerton was loath to touch. But around the time Curtis took on the lectureship, his research in the cause of imperial unity began to focus on the relationship between European expansion and dependent populations, which he newly deemed the fundamental yet neglected hinge upon which the fate of the British Empire swung. He explained to a colleague in 1912:

The real difficulty is for us properly to realise the claims of the dependencies upon us, seeing that they are almost voiceless.... What has been brought home to me in these laborious researches is that the problem we have taken to study is not one of the problems of history but *the* problem....⁸⁰

Curtis’s election to even the minor post of Beit Lecturer signaled a shift in the direction of empire studies at Oxford toward a universalist engagement of problems in the dependencies. Curtis left the lectureship after one year to pursue other imperial unity-oriented projects, but before going, he handpicked Reginald Coupland, also a New

⁷⁹ Bosco and May, eds., *The Round Table, The Empire/Commonwealth and British Foreign Policy*; John Kendle, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975; Alex May, “The Round Table, 1910-66”, Oxford, D.Phil. thesis, 1995.

⁸⁰ Curtis to Philip Kerr, 2 March 1912, papers of Lionel Curtis and the Round Table, MSS Eng.hist. c 806/142, Bodleian Modern Manuscripts. Quoted in Lavin, “Lionel Curtis and the Idea of Commonwealth,” 104.

College classicist, to succeed him in the position.⁸¹ Both Curtis and Coupland went on to apply their idealist vision of ancient Greek politics to efforts to reform the structures of the British empire, or “Commonwealth,”⁸² as it emerged from the First World War: Curtis as foremost ideologue of the Round Table and founder of the Royal Institute of International Affairs; Coupland as the second Beit Professor of Colonial History, succeeding Egerton in 1920, and government consultant on political commissions for India, Burma and Palestine from the 1920s through 1940s.

The shift at Oxford marked one major development in the field of imperial history in the years immediately preceding the Great War. Meanwhile, in London, another Oxford product launched his own campaign to bring the entirety of the British empire under the aegis of what he called Imperial Studies. Sidney Low, a graduate of Balliol College, contemporary of Alfred Milner, and aspiring constitutional historian turned Tory journalist, had been chased from the political staff of the *Standard* in 1904 because of his free-trade views. This turn of fortune took him to India; he subsequently published a hugely popular book on the political and social development on the subcontinent. But his efforts to revive a newspaper career were thwarted again in 1911 by the same far-right fiscal and imperial machinations that stymied his work seven years previously.⁸³ It was after this disappointment that Low went to the Royal Academy to propose a school of Imperial Studies under the auspices of the University of London, which would specifically cover the history of British India.⁸⁴ This proposal led to the introduction of Imperial Studies at King’s College London in 1912, and the eventual establishment of the Rhodes Chair of Imperial History at the same school in 1919.

Why, on multiple fronts in 1912, did India and the dependencies suddenly enter the framework of a discipline that had previously defended against their intrusion? One answer may lie in the contemporary perception that the forces of nationalism were enveloping global politics. Another might be found in the escalation of political innovations in India, through the royal durbar and the relocation of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Perhaps Curtis took note of the formation of the African National Congress in South Africa. Or the shift may have come partly out of the Edwardian war of attrition between imperialists over the future of the self-governing empire, which eventually led to a backlash from those excluded from careers on the frontline.⁸⁵ Looking from this moment back to the ideological milieu that had seen the uneasy birth of the institutional discipline, we should remember that, through the first decade of the twentieth century, imperial history took as its scope the exclusive racial and political

⁸¹ Lavin, “Lionel Curtis and the Idea of Commonwealth”; Deborah Lavin, *From Empire to Commonwealth: A Biography of Lionel Curtis*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

⁸² Lionel Curtis, *The Problem of the Commonwealth*, London, Macmillan, 1916.

⁸³ Sidney Low, *A Vision of India*, London, Smith, Elder, & Co., 1906; Desmond Chapman-Huston, *The lost historian: a memoir of S. Low*, London, J. Murray, 1936; Andrew S. Thompson, “Low, Sir Sidney James Mark,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed online at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34608>.

⁸⁴ Sidney Low, *Organization of Imperial Studies in London*, London, H. Frowde, 1912.

⁸⁵ Low’s career is one example that supports this hypothesis.

parameters that Seeley articulated in 1883. Yet, despite the reluctance of the field's first professor, imperial history emerged charged by a supremely anti-Seeleyan concern with concrete political mechanisms for imperial federation. The leading young radical imperialists of the Edwardian years, most all of them Oxford men, wanted to revolutionize Britain's relations with its colonies through concrete innovation— some by changing the work of government, some by economic union, but all backlit by a belief that the secrets, or at least the methods of studying, the unwritten English constitution held keys to imperial unity. While “constructive imperialists” fought “free trade” imperialists, all the same they took the basic shape of the British empire to be that of white colonial settlement, self-governing and inclined by historical forces toward union. When tensions in India, the dependencies and the mandates erupted to the fore around the era of the First World War, mainstream imperial theorists had but the most basic foundations for confronting the histories of this other “colonial” empire. How could a constitutionally-oriented framework be applied to populations in India and Africa existing, until that point, in a supposedly different moral and historical realm? The resolution of this dilemma, and its entanglement with real-time constitutional negotiations from the interwar years through decolonization, make all the more urgent a complete understanding of first-draft imperial history and its successor schools.