

# Pairing Empires: Britain and the United States, 1857-1947

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The Kipling poem known by every good student of empire begins with a seasoned empire advising a nascent one:

Take up the White Man's burden,  
Send forth the best ye breed—  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captive's need;  
To wait in heavy harness  
On fluttered folk and wild—  
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
Half devil and half child.<sup>1</sup>

The poem reads like an imperial recruitment drive, with its pretense of sacrifice (who's wearing the harness?) alongside its invitation to administer, instruct, and build. Little wonder that the "white man's burden" would become a catch phrase for paternalistic colonial rule in general and for British sway in particular.

But the occasion for Kipling's poem was the United States's colonial war in the Philippines, and the poem imagines colonization's effects and its audience in ways totally unlike such classic documents of the Indian Empire as, for example, Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education." Macaulay cares primarily about what effect a "single shelf of a good European library"<sup>2</sup> can have upon those whom David Malouf has labeled "British objects."<sup>3</sup> His interest is confined, that is, to his subalterns in training. But in Kipling's 1899 poem, squarely in the middle of the period explored by this special issue of the *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, the implied audience, both for the act of colonization and for Kipling's own poem, is radically different. The poem concludes:

Comes now, to search your manhood,  
Through all the thankless years,  
Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,  
The judgment of your peers!<sup>4</sup>

It is not "natives" here but peers who matter, Britons whose dear-bought wisdom allows them both to pave an imperial way and to judge America's success in following it. Joseph Conrad's exactly contemporaneous *Lord Jim* proposes a similar kind of evaluation in its prolonged debates about whether the central character possesses the internal fortitude to be "one of us."<sup>5</sup> The careful eyeballing that Kipling here promises constitutes what academics will recognize as a peer review.

America faces judgment based upon its ability to make its practices resemble those of Britain. Lord Jim must perform just as *we* would have performed in that situation to be "one of us"; so, too, the United States is expected to establish its resemblance to, even its identity with, the judges who promise to search (with chilly fingers) its manhood. It is not the colonized but the colonizer who is here practicing that mimicry that Fanon found buried at the heart of the colonial experience.<sup>6</sup>

If even that old saw, "The White Man's Burden," turns out to be intimately concerned with the world of imperial comparison and the spaces between empires, the recent emergence of scholarship attentive to such topics, some it published here, is overdue and welcome. Divided up by area studies and language, the apparatus with which scholars approach imperialism tends to leave each empire freestanding. Too often, the dyad of metropole and colony overpowers analysis of how empires were entangled with each other in literary, imaginative, social, political, military, and economic interactions.<sup>7</sup> Participants in empire, from Kipling and those he inspired to his many opponents, knew better. Empires were rivals for territory and commerce; they formed diplomatic as well as cultural alliances; they traded and adapted models of rule; they imagined their own histories as empires and nonempires with templates borrowed from others. The "judgment" that colonial peers extended each other, along with their supports and threats, deserve a more intense scholarly scrutiny than they have generally received to date.

It was to this end that we organized the November 2000 conference "Pairing Empires: Britain and the United States, 1857-1947" at the Johns Hopkins University, from which these papers are drawn. The goals of the conference were open-ended: to ask both what might be gained by juxtaposing the British Empire and the United States within one analytic frame and to inquire what scholars working on imperial themes might learn from each other across traditional academic boundaries of both area and discipline. In seeking a discussion of the worlds between empires, the limits of this framework were clear to us. By isolating Britain and the United States, for example, we were in many ways reifying an Anglo-American "special relationship" whose very anatomy we were interested in exploring, diminishing possibilities for other interimperial connections. That two of the most noteworthy papers focused on American and British conceptions of Germany as an imperial power (Nabers and Bönker) was a welcome reminder that, in condensing for effect, we risked omitting altogether indispensable parts of the story.

Nor was that the only risk. In confining the conference to the era of "high imperialism," we were cropping the story chronologically in a way that highlighted formal colonial rule and effaced the cold war, when the United States's imperial power manifested itself most thoroughly. However loose in practice, our stated time boundaries—from the Sepoy rebellion to Indian independence—are obviously more British than American, although they also roughly trace the period from the U.S. Civil War to World War II and Philippine independence, transitions that mark important shifts in the United States as an empire.

As it turned out, each of our restrictions was honored more in the breach than the observance. The presence of Germany loomed large in several papers, and Ann McGrath's article, which focuses on post-World War II Australia, analyzes with telling effect the sort of colonial retrospection—and even nostalgia—that could only come into view after, as Kipling puts it, "the Captains and the Kings depart."<sup>8</sup> But the overall framework still seems to us to have produced a

useful focus. We made these decisions to lend some shape to a conference that, drawing on a bewilderingly large literature on empire in the humanities and social sciences, might otherwise have grown beyond coherence. We also did so to focus on the intersections between empires as contemporaries rather than separate entities, with the British simply "passing the torch" of global hegemony to the Americans in the mid-twentieth century. The concentration on Anglophone empires made possible interdisciplinary, as well as interimperial, discussions between literary critics, historians, anthropologists, and others.

Indeed, it might be argued that the Anglo-American relationship is a crucial interimperial linkage in part because it still looked, to some late-nineteenth-century Britons—and as Katie-Louise Thomas shows, to an increasing number of self-conscious "Anglo-Americans"—like an *intraimperial* one. Kipling's poetic call for peer judgment may somewhat obscure the fact that, from a British perspective, an expanding America might be construed not as a colleague to but as an extension of Britain itself. Consider, for example, parliamentarian Charles Wentworth Dilke's 1869 *Greater Britain*. In 1866-67, Dilke had famously "followed England round the world," undertaking a racial grand tour through "English-speaking, or . . . English-governed lands," especially through the United States and Australia.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, he encountered "Britons" scattered everywhere. "If I remarked that climate, soil, manners of life, that mixture with other peoples had modified the blood," he wrote, "I saw, too, that in essentials the race was always one."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Dilke came to define the British Empire, and Britishness itself, as the ability to project "Anglo-Saxons," their institutions, and their culture even beyond the formal reaches of British colonial power. Even in America, where "the peoples of the world are being fused together," they were being "run into an English mould."<sup>11</sup> Here, what's good for America is good for the British Empire—because America is, in some sense, part of that empire.

Yet along with that claim for transformative Britishness came an underlying worry—that the empire might do to Britons what Britain aimed to do to it: "Can the English in America, in the long run, survive the common fate of all migrating races? Is it true that, if the American settlers continue to exist, it will be at the price of being no longer English, but Red Indian? It is certain that the English families long in the land have the features of the extirpated race."<sup>12</sup>

A similar attention to the "hither edge of free land" and its metamorphic power is the starting point for historian Frederick Jackson Turner's lecture, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). Indeed, the similarities run deeper even than that. Both Dilke and Turner strove to account for the formation of a cultural whole (be it British Empire or American nation-state) out of polyglot, racially mixed citizenry; both told stories of white colonization over new territory; both were writing in response to perceived crises of empire. Perhaps most importantly, each intertwined the British and U.S. Empires analytically.

But if for Dilke the British Empire was defined by its constant reference back a "racial" core in Britain itself, for Turner what defined America was precisely Europe's other: the frontier. As he put it, "the true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West." Turner's nation building, based in the cultural transformation of settler populations, began precisely where Dilke's anxieties left off. "The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization," wrote Turner. "The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts

him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin."<sup>13</sup> What had terrified Dilke seemed both inescapable and laudable to Turner: where immigrants were "Americanized" in the frontier "crucible," the "mixed race" that resulted was "English in neither nationality nor characteristics."<sup>14</sup>

But was Turner's world of continental expansion an empire? In racially recolonizing the United States for the British Empire, Dilke had been more than willing to dub Americans, as "Anglo-Saxons," part of the "extirpating race."<sup>15</sup> But in describing a pattern of innovation in America that flowed not from east to west but from west to east and by seemingly substituting a form of geographic for racial determinism, Turner sublimated "extirpation" into nation building: the settler, disposing of "free land," conquered by the frontier, was himself not a conqueror. In this way, Turner was both drawing on and fueling a powerful language of American exceptionalism that would help define the United States as not simply free of European influence, but free as well of the taint of empire.

It was in part to chart how such discrepancies were articulated, how the forces that shaped one empire might translate or fail to translate into ideological drives in another, that this conference was conceived. The papers that formed "Pairing Empires" were rich and disorderly in their diversity. The essays were varied in their geographic limits, their chosen time periods, and, most strikingly, the ways in which they defined empire and situated it analytically. Some papers focused on the increasingly dense literary, imaginary, and political exchanges of the turn of the twentieth century, with its Anglo-American "rapprochement." Kate-Louise Thomas, for example, here situates Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* within broader discussions of Anglo-American racial "reunion" as the making of an interimperial body politic. Some papers examined imperial spaces that were both shared and contested by Americans and Britons, particularly in the Caribbean. Harvey Neptune discusses how white American soldiers occupying Trinidad during World War II, viewing as it as a kind of frontier, undermined older British colonial codes of racial intermingling by engaging in sexual relationships with black women.

Other papers focused on the movement of cultural forms, policies, and institutions between empires. Ann McGrath here discusses the game of "cowboys and indians" as it was played in Australia, linking American and Australian frontier and colonial mythologies at the level of children's play. On a very different terrain, Dirk Bönker examines the development of navalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a transatlantic imperial discourse linking British, German, and American naval officers through languages of professionalism, expertise, and "efficiency." Some papers described the ways in which one empire might threaten interference with or subversion of another. Catherine Candy, focusing on Irish émigré to India Margaret Cousins, describes how Irish and Indian feminists used the platform and image of the United States to articulate both their own exoticism and critiques of the British Empire. Deak Nabers finds, in the pre-World War I "spy craze" in Britain and its literary manifestations in the novels of Childers and Buchan, fears that agents of the German Empire might penetrate and undermine metropolitan Britain through their very invisibility.

Each paper, then, can be placed at the apex of one sort of work presented at the conference. The threads that connect these papers are numerous and cut across disciplinary as well as national boundaries. Students of a larger imperial orbit might make note of the work of Nabers and Bönker

for their insistence on the presence of Germany as modifying or altering Anglo-American conceptions of imperialism. Scholars of race and ethnicity might focus on how Neptune and Thomas engage with racial debates of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century. Thomas suggests ways that cultural elites and popular literature conceptualized the possibility of sanguinary union between Britain and America. Neptune shows that the rules that framed racialized interactions between American soldiers and British imperial subjects varied widely in relation to conceptions of what was acceptable behavior at "home" or on a military frontier. For interimperial historians, Neptune shares with Candy an interest in the way that the idea or reality of American involvement in the British Empire disrupted British imperial practice. And that sort of disruption can also be linked to McGrath's account of how America's Western games inflected Australians' understanding of their own (both colonizing and colonized) identity. Finally, one could read Thomas's account of the desirability of erasing interimperial difference in the Anglo-American case as a companion piece to Nabers's account of the dangers involved in the erasure of interimperial difference in contemplating the specter of German invasion-by-imitation.

Of course, the essays can (and even should) also be aggregated by discipline, period, and region or empire. Yet perhaps we ought to say a word in closing as to the advantages of the very disparities readers will encounter here. Partly because of interdisciplinarity, partly because of the way empire figures very differently in British and American Studies, the authors here define and represent empire very differently: as a component of children's culture, as part of literary imagination, as a site of racial contestation and redefinition, as the politics of military state building.

What this diversity perhaps reveals is how much remains to be said, argued, and thought on these topics. Walter Benjamin's emblematic angel of history, blown backward into the future, glimpsing the present once it passes by and becomes past, seems unable to register larger patterns in what's passing and hence is unable to imagine what's to come. This collection aims to capture our present-day conversations so that future work on the interimperial will at once build upon and supersede the formulations offered by "Pairing Empires" participants, all of whom we thank gratefully for their participation.<sup>16</sup> If this conference and this collection are to leave a legacy, it will be in future scholarship attuned enough to the questions raised here that scholars can recognize places where our answers have gone wrong or have not gone far enough. In the future recognition of our present failings lies this collection's hope for success.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden" (1899), in *The Complete Verse* (London: Cathie, 1990), 261, 1.1-8. For "The White Man's Burden" and the many satires it inspired, see <http://www.boondocksnet.com/kipling/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education" (1835), 237-49, in *Selected Writings*, ed. John Clive and Thomas Pinney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 241.

<sup>3</sup> David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," 262, lines 61-64.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900; New York: Norton, 1996), 30 *inter alia*.

<sup>6</sup> On mimicry, see not only Frantz Fanon's "Concerning Violence," in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 35-107, but also Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125-33.

<sup>7</sup> For some of the best recent historiography of imperialism, see Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Cooper and Stoler (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 1-56; Patrick Wolfe, "History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory from Marx to Postcolonialism," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (April 1997): 388-420; Michael Adas, "High" Imperialism and the "New History" in *Essays in Global and Comparative History* (American Historical Association, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "Recessional" (1897), in *The Complete Verse*, 266, line 8.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries* (London: Macmillan, 1890), xvii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 217-18.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Re-reading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Dilke, *Greater Britain*, 217.

<sup>16</sup> This conference would have been impossible without the generous support of several departments and programs at Johns Hopkins, which we thank: the History Department, the English Department, the Humanities Center, and the Institute for Global Studies. We also thank all its participants, the respondents, Rick Kaiser, and especially Helene Littman and Julie Voss Spokus for their indispensable help. For the contents of the original program, contact Julie Voss Spokus at [jvoss@jhu.edu](mailto:jvoss@jhu.edu)

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