ISSN 2754-5547

https://doi.org/10.52230/JVON5553

Jatinder Mann and Iain Johnston-White (Editors), *Revisiting the British World: New Voices and Perspectives*

Carl Bridge

To cite this book review: Jatinder Mann and Iain Johnston-White (Editors), *Revisiting the British World: New Voices and Perspectives* by Carl Bridge, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 3 (September 2023): 158-160, https://doi.org/10.52230/DRPP2200

Jatinder Mann and Iain Johnston-White (Editors), *Revisiting the British World: New Voices and Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2022), 276pp+xvi. Hardback. £64. ISBN: 978-1-4331-8741-4.

Historiographically, the British World first emerged in 1997 at a conference at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies as an analytical term for capturing the wider penumbra of Britishness that existed in the formal and informal British Empire, and even beyond, where people, usually but not always of British origin or descent, identified significantly, but often not solely, as British. British-derived networks, ideas, and institutions flourished not only in the formal empire but in Japan, China, the Americas, and the Middle East. The term itself was in use historically by commentators from about the First World War to the 1960s, such as by the London press baron Lord Burnham, and later, politicians Leo Amery (in the United Kingdom – UK) and Robert Menzies (in Australia), among others. The term is hybrid, capacious, composite, permeable, and even symbiotic, as any worthwhile means of pinning down complex notions of identity must be. For scholars, this is both a blessing (enabling rich description and understanding) and a curse (it can never be sharply defined).

Using this framing, there have been at least three major collections of essays published and dozens of monographs; this collection, *Revisiting the British World: New Voices and Perspectives,* edited by Jatinder Mann and Iain Johnston-White, is the latest contribution to the field. It contains nine chapters, each by a different, usually new scholar, in roughly chronological order, and all on previously unexplored aspects of the British World, demonstrating, once more, how useful the term is as an explanatory tool. As the editors point out in their deftly context-setting, elegant, and insightful introductory and concluding remarks, the authors have used a range of different approaches to elucidate their subjects, from life-writing and critical discourse analysis to geopolitics, constitutional and political history, and through to the emerging fields of the history of celebrity and of humour. A hundred flowers bloom to sometimes dazzling effect.

The first contribution (by André Brett) identifies twelve different separatist campaigns in Australasia beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, many of them previously unnoticed by historians. The successful ones are well-known, those to hive off what became Tasmania, Queensland, and Victoria from New South Wales, but other further centripetal and some centrifugal tendencies were checked. The progression was far from inevitable: Australia might have had more states, and New Zealand might have joined the Australian Federation. Brett sees a tension between overall British values and the self-interest of land-hungry settlers.

Next, the focus shifts to India, where Sucharita Sen throws fascinating light on the roles of Indian servants in British households under the Raj. She points out that the bonds between servants and their masters and mistresses, particularly those with British children, were often stronger than the pull of nationalism and independence or of work in the host Indian society, and that these ties continued beyond 1947. Here are glimpses of more nuanced and complex colonial encounters than found elsewhere in the literature.

A harder-edged and racialised colonialism is found in Danielle E. Lorenz's trenchant critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Toronto Professor George Wrong's 1921 history texts for Canadian schools. She demonstrates that Indigenous Canadians were almost literally written out of Wrong's whiggish settler narrative, not just by omission but even down to the bias in his language. I hope in future work, she

goes beyond this penetrating classificatory demolition enabled by CDA to explain more of how and why the minds of Wrong and his contemporaries worked as they did.

The global celebrity of the great Australian opera diva, Nellie Melba, is the subject of Karen Fox's exemplary essay. She shows that Melba's very stage name identified her birthplace and acted as an engine for promoting the empire's second city, 'Marvellous Melbourne'. Everyone wanted a piece of Melba, who was at the same time a Melburnian, Victorian, Australian, Australasian, and British 'national treasure' (a neat example of what Saul Dubow has called composite identity). As with the great cricketer Donald Bradman later on, Melba's ability and fame inverted the usual imperial order. This is further evidence, of course, however extraordinary, of the emergence of a multi-nodal British World.

At the other social extreme, Paul Kiem, deploying life-writing skills, offers us a splendidly researched and engaging portrait of the Edwardian Australian itinerant street caricaturist, Louis Vasco Loureiro. He was London-born and, as he put it, 'three-sixths Portuguese and one-sixth each French, Flemish and English' but Australia-raised. Though well-connected in Melbourne's comfortably middle-class art world, he elected as a young man to go 'Round the World on a Pencil,' plying his precarious trade on ferries and in tourist resorts across the virtually 'all red' route from Australia to Aotearoa New Zealand, South Africa, the UK, the United States of America (USA), and Canada. Interestingly, Kiem shows superbly that the polyglot Francophile Bohemian Vasco (as he called himself) felt more at home in London and Vancouver than in the USA; the British World, for him, seemed more welcoming and familiar than what he saw as grasping, dollar-hungry Yankeeland. Many other more conventional Britishers, from Neville Chamberlain to Robert Menzies, felt similarly.

In a well-illustrated (naturally) and suggestive *tour d'horizon* of cartoon history, Richard Scully points out that the 'empire of humour' mapped by London's *Punch* magazine, and its offshoots and imitators, for a century or so after its founding in 1841 stretched not only all over the British Empire but to the USA, China, and Japan. What is more, perhaps despite decades of nationalist predominance, it thrived in India. Cartoonists plied their trade around British World networks, with some of the greatest, prominent among them the Aotearoa New Zealand London-based expatriate Sir David Low, working in several countries. A late flowering saw the Australasians, Petty, Rigby, and Garland contribute to the London satire boom of the 1960s.

Political and constitutional history is represented a second time in Jatinder Mann's timely exploration of the final 1970s stages of the transition in Australia, Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand from ethnicity-based to civic-based citizenship laws. These registered a significant moment in the unravelling of the British World as Britishness receded as a dominant marker of identity in what had been some of its heartlands.

Two more essays complete the collection, both in the field of international history. William A. Stoltz offers a workmanlike, mildly geopolitical overview of Australian foreign policy (defined in its broadest sense to include trade, security, and ideology) from 1901 to 1967. Key among his four related pillars is that Australia saw its national interest throughout this long period as projected through British (and increasingly USA) power in the Pacific as an 'agent of empire.' He labels this a form of imperial internationalism and says it is underrated by most scholars for the pre-1939 period. He credits David Lee's recent work on Bruce but, in excessively striving for originality, constructs something of a straw man by attacking outdated and

oversimplistic interpretations by political scientists like J. D. B. Miller and Coral Bell, to whom the archives were mostly closed, and by omitting a lot of work by historians who have used those records, such as that by Peter Edwards, Kosmas Tsokhas, Bernard Attard, James Curran and me, among others. In fact, the Meaney thesis – that Australia has pretty much always acted in its perceived, if not in its real national interest – has long held the field.

The second essay (by Andrew Kelly) is an exhilarating close reading of Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand reactions to British policy in the Pacific from the Second World War to Vietnam. It charts how what Kiwi diplomat Denis McLean once memorably dubbed 'the prickly pair' navigated their way through events and crises from ANZAM (via Manus and Western Samoa) to ANZUS, to nuclear testing, to Suez and to Vietnam. Australia, having recently felt the hot breath of the threat of Japanese invasion, was less forgiving of British tergiversations than its antipodean neighbour, and Aotearoa New Zealand more sceptical of USA motives. The general trend, however, was the same for both and led each (minus the UK) to active participation in the Vietnam War.

I doff my hat to the editors and contributors. This fine collection is a resounding testimony to the continuing usefulness, fecundity, and depth of work on the significance of the British World moment.

Carl Bridge, King's College London