Empire, Migration and Identity in the British World

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Editor: Kent Fedorowich  
Andrew S. Thompson  
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As Kent Fedorowich (University of the West of England) and Andrew Thompson (University of Exeter) argue in the introduction to their edited collection Empire, Migration and Identity in the British World, the processes and histories of empire, migration and the British world are closely enjoined. The transfer of ‘Britishness’ beyond the British Isles was contingent on the mass migration of people from those islands, of 13.5 million British people settling across Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and the United States between 1815 and 1930 (p. 6). Settlers and migrants maintained connections with Britain which were emotional (based both in affective personal and kinship relations and on an emotional affiliation with a British ‘home’); economic (in the sense of extensive remittance networks and the generation similar systems of labour and capital to new locations); cultural (most strikingly illustrated through the dissemination of the English language) and political. But, as is apparent throughout the collection’s chapters, these changes were by no means limited to the diffusion or dissemination of people or ideas but were also about creating an integrated or globalised world in which economic relationships, family networks and political practices were materially and conceptually linked, and which, as Fedorowich and Thompson put it, ‘engendered new, more transnational, ways of thinking’ (p. 6). The 11 chapters, arranged roughly chronologically, do testament to the exciting and emerging scholarship in this field.

The first two chapters address in different ways the large-scale demographic changes that occurred in this period and contemporary interpretations of them. Eric Richards asks: why did people emigrate? What triggered the ‘tectonic’ shifts in population that occurred in this period? And what was the ‘social psychology’ of migration? Not only do the answers to these fundamental and deceptively simple questions continue to elude us, Richards argues, but ‘we also have a rather poor grasp on the ways in which the exodus of perhaps thirty million British migrants affected Britain itself’ (pp. 42–3). In addressing these questions Richards draws our attention to the close, though often overlooked, relationship between short and long distance migration and to the processes of intra-national urbanisation that preceded the more iconic waves of overseas migration of the 19th century. ‘The British World, in its most basic origins’, he writes, ’started with people moving along country lanes from cottages in the towns and villages of rural Britain’ (p. 42). Richards returns to Thomas Malthus who still forms a ghostly presence over discussions of emigration. Malthus himself was ambivalent about emigration which he believed to offer temporary relief to over-populated areas but to potentially exacerbate the problem through generating a ‘vacuum effect’. Using as case studies the Isle
of Man, the West Highlands of Scottish, and Swaledale in North Yorkshire, Richards investigates the variant local dynamics of migration, helping us to understand the phenomenon at the core of this collection. Kathrin Levitan also focuses on 19th-century perceptions of the era’s rapidly changing demographics, but from the perspective of census compilation. She convincingly argues that census data enabled new ways of imagining the nation and the empire, which, over the 19th century, became increasingly racialised. ‘By placing population at the centre of discourse about the nation’, she argues, ‘the census encouraged people to visualise groups as proportions of the whole, and the harmony of the social body as understood by many nineteenth-century observers depended primarily on the maintenance of healthy proportions of people’ (p. 60).

Questions of identity are central to chapters by Carey, Jones, Chilton, Constantine and Bright. In exploring Welsh Presbyterian missionaries in Sylhet (an area itself defined by internal migration), Aled Jones highlights the complex negotiations of accommodation and resistance that played out both at local levels, and as these developments were fed back to Wales, global arenas. Religious networks are also the focus of Hilary Carey’s chapter which explores the startling degree of the Anglican Church in Australia’s reliance on British born and trained clergy well into the 20th century. As Carey notes, the clergy were closely and multiply bound up with processes of migration. Emigrants were deemed to require access to religious instruction and teaching; during the ‘hungry forties’ clergy joined emigration committees, Boards of Guardians and Poor Law Committees, devoted to the material as well as spiritual welfare of migrants; clergy acted as references and advocates for potential migrants applying for assisted emigration; churches established missions to emigrants in transit and when adjusting to life in a new country; and British born emigrants formed a substantive part of the ordained personnel for churches in the settler colonies. Carey argues that the clergy and their networks were important in the diffusion of British identity in Australia and go a significant way towards explaining the continued Australian attachment to Britain at the dawn of the 20th century. Chilton approaches the relationship between Britishness and emergent settler nationalism from a different perspective, interrogating concepts of white hegemony, British superiority, and the construction of an Anglo-Canadian or Britannic identity in Canada prior to the Second World War. She notes the privileging of British migrants (in particular British women) over their European counterparts and the colonial desire for a particular ‘sort’ of immigrant who met the classed and racialised aspirations of the new nation.

Zooming in on an individual’s negotiations of such identities, Stephen Constantine examines a series of letters between ‘Maidie’ and her family following the former’s migration to Australia in 1925. Reading the letters against the grain, Constantine explores Maidie’s shifting sense of belonging and asks whether and when she self-identified as a British citizen, an imperial settler, or indeed an Australian. Rachel Bright’s chapter also helps us to think about settler identity as she argues for the importance of Asian migration as a foil against which new conceptions of nationhood were formed, and, in particular, the privileging of whiteness as a boundary of inclusion. Her piece is particularly welcome as the only chapter of the collection to address non-white migration which, though a major force shaping the British world, is notably absent from this volume. Perhaps not unconnectedly, the chapters in this book are overwhelmingly about ‘free’ migration with no discussion of experiences of enslavement and convict transportation, for example. Bright’s chapter offers some reflection on the ambiguous bounds of what constitutes ‘free’ migration in the case of indentured labour, noting that whilst she focuses here on ‘free’ migration “‘Free’ is a slight misnomer” essentially meaning that ‘they operated their own loan systems to organise and control migration, outside the direct control of Europeans’. Michele Langfield also works at the edge of ‘free’ and ‘coerced’ migration by exploring child resettlement schemes. Between 1869 and 1939 more than 100,000 children were deemed to be at risk of crime and destitution and sent to the settler empire, to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Rhodesia to start a new life. Mindful of the controversy around these child migrants in recent years, Langfield focuses on the Middlemore Children’s Emigration Homes, to suggest that a more balanced perspective is needed and that it some ways the Middlesmore scheme was ‘perhaps ahead of its time in attitudes to juvenile migration and child care’ (p. 151).

The final three chapters focus on the post-colonial world helping the reader to think about if the British
World has ‘ended’. Jo Duffy asks questions about the lives of white colonial settlers when independence was granted to Northern Rhodesia in 1964. Using oral testimonies, she explores how former settlers related to the new state. Did they accept Zambian citizenship? Did they ‘come home’ to Britain? Was Britain, in fact, ‘home’ and if not where was ‘home’ now? A. James Hammerton also analyses questions of home and belonging in the post-war era but does so through migrants out of Britain in this period (including self-identified ‘refugees from Thatcher’s Britain’). In using oral history to probe the reasons individuals cite for migrating, Hammerton offers an interesting follow-up on some of the questions Richards explores migrant motivation several hundred years earlier. Andrew Thompson and Eleanor Passmore’s chapter tackles the thorny issues of ‘multiculturalism’, ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration’ in the context of post-war migration from the rapidly decolonising Global South to metropolitan Britain and France. In the context of the current rows about immigration across the EU, it provides a useful insight to the powerful and continuing discourses of exclusion that migration prompts and reflects.

As a whole, the volume raises several interesting areas for exploration. The most obvious perhaps is that of identity. As Thompson and Ferdorowich note in their introduction ‘[b]y its very nature, migration is transformative. It changes the way in which individuals – and the families they left behind – imagine their social and political spaces, thereby making their migration a defining aspect of their identity’ (p. 15). Several of the chapters ask how identities are made, kept, remade or changed through migration. There are chapters which focus on religion as a binding force for identity formation (Jones and Carey), on settler identity (Duffy, Carey, Chilton, Constantine) and on how the migration of a new ‘other’ (such Chinese migrants) reshape the identities of pre-existing residents and earlier settlers (Bright, Passmore and Thompson). Another issue is what connections are maintained by migrants when they relocate. This issue is very present in Constantine’s chapter as he interrogates these connections within one particular family and appears in a different form in Jones discussion of the connections overseas missionaries maintained with their sending communities. The extensive remittance culture is another way of looking at these connections (Fedorowich and Thompson, Richards). The articles are overwhelmingly about migration out of the British Isles. A couple look at migration to Britain in a postcolonial context either the ‘return’ of former settlers (Duffy) or the ‘reverse’ migration of those indigenous to Empire (Thompson and Passmore), whilst Hammerton touches upon serial migration.

Having identified migration as a central feature in the making of the British World, it was a pity the volume did not interrogate what makes this world distinctive from other process of global or transnational migration. In their introduction, Ferdorowich and Thompson reiterate the main tenets of the British World concept that has been developed over the last 15 years. That is as an ‘abstraction’ that ‘extends well beyond the physical confines of those regions on the map painted red’ based on ‘the three broad themes of diaspora, culture and identity’ (p. 2). Part of this definition is in its plurality and its openness to ‘a variety of interpretations’. Yet, at least for me, the chapters raised a number of questions about the boundaries of the British World that remained unanswered. Firstly, there were geographical questions. The vast bulk of the chapters here deal with the settler colonies and beyond that nearly all look at places that were either English-speaking (that is, the United States) or, despite the caveats of the ‘imaginary’ British World, within the (formal) British Empire. But Hammerton’s ‘serial migrants’ travel not only to Australia and Canada, but also to Spain and France, whilst many of the ‘Asian’ migrants Bright explores came from China. Is it fair to deduce from such inclusions that the British World is a global world – and is this problematic? It would be useful to interrogate the dynamics of this further. If, as Hammerton argues, places with a ‘British’ connection such as Australia, continue to exercise a pull to migrants in the late 20th century, then what does this show about the privileging of some connections over others? A related question would be: what is the importance of Empire and colonialism in framing these particular migration patterns? The book’s title frames migration in the context of both ‘Empire’ and the ‘British World’, but there was little done to interrogate the impact of Empire or the imperial on migration. Is ‘the British World’ another way of discussing ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ migration, or is there something different going on? The place of continental Europe in discussions about colonial and ‘British World’ networks seems particularly underexplored, yet as evident from Chilton’s discussion of those the British migrants were privileged over, moved very much of the wider
process. From a different perspective, I would have appreciated a more rigorous interrogation of the category of ‘migrant’. If we define migrant loosely, to include temporary residents such as Jones’ missionaries in India, then which other mobile people might we include? And what distinguishes this category from other travellers?

These questions are not meant as criticisms but issues that could be taken further as could elements of all edited collections. Perhaps in this case, these unanswered questions are exacerbated by the time-lag one senses between the conference from which these papers were originally delivered (in 2007) and the publication of this collection six years later. In this time, we have seen several other collections on these themes including Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine’s *Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series* on *Migration and Empire* and Robert Bickers edited collection *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas* which, have also changed, somewhat, the parameters of debate. Nonetheless, there is plenty of rich and exciting material here, and the collection is doubtless a useful addition to the existing scholarship.

**Notes**


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