I am grateful to Michael Collins for his perceptive, generous and constructive review of my book, and also to the deputy editor of Reviews in History for the extensive allocation of space to this analysis. Some of the points raised early in the review in the section summarising and commenting on its structure and contents, including Irish land-use history and the comparative dimension of the different colonial land claims, for example by the French, British and Germans in such areas as the Nile Delta, Morocco, and the reformation of the indigenous religions of indigenous peoples, are in part an outcome of space limitation in what is a very large book, and partly of personal choice and emphasis. The comments provide, however, very helpful ideas for future reflection, research and writing.

An important feature of the book not, however, mentioned in the review, and which reflects an important part of the author’s and a historical geography perspective on geographies of imperialism and colonialism, is the inclusion of 67 maps, diagrams and photographs. These add significantly in my view to the strengths of the project, drawing on a range of archival sources, my own experience and photographs taken during research visits, and the expertise of the cartographers at the School of Geography, University of Leeds. They provide, I think, a helpful information base and a series of interpretative challenges, and indicate a generosity of space provision for their inclusion by Cambridge University Press, who also deserve greater commendation for producing a book of this size and complexity. The book, it should be noted, is also available in paperback (only the hardback version and price is listed at the beginning of the review).

The remainder of my response will look at the broader question raised by Michael Collins towards the end of the review, of the extent to which the book succeeds in presenting a balance between description and theory in matters of historical geographies of imperialism and colonialism. This is obviously in some respects a matter for readers to determine for themselves – a question of individual judgement – in relation to a chosen authorial emphasis and experience of particular fields within what is the very broad sub-discipline of historical geography, and also a reflection of the very large geographical and chronological scales covered in the book, and the period during which it was written.

Books in historical geography dealing with very large spatial scales and time-scales are rare, and practical space constraints restrict fuller treatment of methodological and theoretical underpinnings to the many different topics, places and time periods covered. Robert Wilson has noted, in a review essay on environmental history and with particular reference to two monumental works – Donald Meinig’s four volumes on The Shaping of America, published from 1986 to 2004 and Michael Williams’ Deforesting the Earth: From Prehistory to Global Crisis (2003) – that they ‘were written by historical geographers in the later stages of their careers. Apparently, historical geographies on these time scales are not for younger scholars’ (1): a debatable contention! A similar example of a high quality large-scale historical geography of a former part of the British Empire is Graeme Wynn’s Canada and Arctic North America (2007).
Miles Ogborn in his recent publication *Global Lives: Britain and the world, 1550-1800* (2009), has also pointed to the *plurality* of potential ways into large-scale analyses in historical geography: ‘For many, understanding global changes in the past – for example tracing histories of migrations, the development of trade, the building of empires or the uses of technologies – is also a matter of the many geographies of globalisation. Thinking about this can usefully develop ideas of networks or webs of global connection that are built in various ways to link people, places, ideas and objects in dynamic configurations … It allows for many different ways of being global, or doing globalisation’. (2)

Some useful discussion points can be raised here about the expectations by Michael Collins of ‘modern’ postcolonial historical geography, including the significance for historical geography of the specified new ‘turns’ which currently and productively engage some historians. It must be noted that the ‘spatial turn’, the development of a very complex set of ideas and processes, based on a fundamental understanding of space which has always been an essential component of geography, and which is so much part of the fabric of current research and teaching in historical geography, is equally if not more significant for historical geography as transnational and materialist turns. The components of this ‘spatial turn’ have been greatly and imaginatively influenced by the ideas of the geographer Doreen Massey. (3) The notion of space as a fixed and unresponsive entity has been replaced in the spatial turn and the new postcolonial critical historical geography, by the idea of imperial space, according to David Lambert and Alan Lester as "the sphere of a multiplicity of trajectories", many of which were given impetus and direction by individuals collaborating in pursuit of specific colonial or anti-colonial projects’, and which were part of a wide range of ‘material’ expressions. (4)

Historical geography, like History and other academic disciplines, is a very broad church, and the extensive work carried out by historical geographers on empires and colonies, at widely differing geographical scales, is not confined to the kinds of work admirably and concisely identified in the book *Modern Historical Geographies*, published over ten years ago, and the continued excellent work by many of its contributors (5), and which is also evident in the innovative seminars, for example, of the London Group of Historical Geographers and the activities of the Historical Geography Research group of the Institute of British Geographers (with the Royal Geographical Society). Geographers and historians also have a range of understanding and expectations of historical geography, and the links and differences between the two disciplines are complex. (6)

Joseph M. Powell has highlighted the function of historical geography in this context: ‘geography’s distinctive response to the continuing challenge of imperialism and colonisation reflects an openness to interdisciplinary theory and ideology, a well-honed regard for interpenetrating scales that can accommodate the activities of individuals and small communities within the grand panorama, and improved understandings of the subject’s long and intimate associations with the advances and retreats of Empire’. (7) In relation to environmental history – an important and innovative intellectual frontier topic for historical geographers working on colonialism and imperialism – Robert Wilson also offers the challenging opinion that ‘world historians have proven adept at incorporating natural science perspectives into their historical analysis – far more than historical geographers have recently done. Clearly such approaches can lead to problems, especially with providing a theoretical or thematic framework to make sense of such large histories. But given geography’s position at the intersection of the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, historical geographers are better able than most scholars to work in this field’. (8) The evidence from recent publications suggests that historical geographers have achieved far more in this respect than Wilson seems to think.

Historical geographers, working in contexts of postcolonial theory, are indeed productively employing innovative approaches to imperial and colonial experiences, especially those associated with the ‘spatial turn’. The processes and experiences of empire operating beyond and at smaller scales than nation states (the ‘transnational turn’), and the understanding of aspects of materialist expressions of empire and colony, including traded goods, writings of individuals and experiences of individuals and families [the ‘material turn’], have *de facto* been considered by historical geographers over a long period of time, but the terms
themselves are of comparatively recent usage in the historical geography literature.

On transnationalism, broad issues have been reviewed, for example, by Cheryl McEwan (9), and detailed empirical examples provided, *inter alia*, in Gordon Winder’s recent study of the historical geographies of Reuters news agency and Gareth Shaw and Paul Hudson’s research on colonial directories and Wellington, New Zealand.(10) Sub-national or regional impacts of empire are also receiving attention, evidenced by Richard Phillips’ study of North-West England as an imperial region.(11)

The broader import of the concept of materialism for cultural and historical geography has been reviewed by Cheryl McEwan, Sarah Whatmore, and others.(12) Partly a reaction to the excessive theorizing in the ‘cultural turn’ in geography, from about the beginning of the present century a very broad range of topics has been researched within the field of materiality, including ‘‘nature’; ‘the urban’; the museum; the body; visual culture; all that which is consumed and produced, and decayed; and that which is conceptualised as ‘landscape’, ‘the domestic scene’, and ‘waste’’, each of these at varying scales.(13) Another developing interest for historical geography, which partly overlaps with the ‘material turn’, is that of biography, both of individuals and of groups of people who were part of the imperial networks. For the geographer there are considerable difficulties in biographical approaches, not least in terms of the width and depth and presentational skills of this type of investigation, but some significant and stimulating studies have recently been produced that illustrate an area of research which gives access to the finer grain of empire and colony. (14) Aspects of some of these have been incorporated into my book.

There is, however, equally important innovative research and writing in historical geographies of colonialism and imperialism that focuses on different issues, for example, on questions of sources of evidence, environmental change, and a range of geopolitical issues. Significant parts of the research carried out by historical geographers in and on ex-colonial countries and regions, particularly Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and North America, and similar work in European countries, notably France, both overlaps and also differs from postcolonial analyses of other regions. Daniel Clayton, for example, has reminded us of this contrasting experience, particularly of the former white settler colonies, ‘which are not postcolonial in the same way as large parts of Africa and Asia. For geographers working on these parts of the world, disciplinary debates about ‘geography’s empire’ seem far off, and the type of globally ambitious (imperial?) postcolonial theory that emanates from India and other hot spots of postcolonial inspiration needs to be recontextualized. Postcolonial theory is used selectively, and regional historical literatures and conversations take on more importance’. (15)

The extensive and seminal work of Chris Christopher in South Africa and Joseph M. Powell in Australia exemplify this process and show how different kinds of theory and source materials can equally well inform and assist progress in historical geography. Christopher has been an extremely active and productive researcher into the historical geography of South Africa, including apartheid over a long period of time. His *Atlas of Apartheid* (1994), renamed *The Atlas of Changing South Africa* (2001), based on extensive archive and published source research, is a fine exemplification of one set of highly relevant approaches to the study of geographies of the imperial past, and this work continues, for example in a recent paper on the first census in South Africa in 1910.(16) His work is extensively referenced in my book, and constitutes, through its approaches to a wide range of sources of evidence and the narrative and analysis of located regional experiences, a major contribution to modern historical geography, of a kind rather different from work by historical geographers which has a more overtly theoretical approach.

Joseph M. Powell, a doyen of historical geography of Australia and the ‘New World’ more generally, has dedicated a professional lifetime to the study of: water management in Australia from 1788; the historiography of Geography in Australia; resource appraisal and environmental management in the British Empire/Commonwealth; and comparative geographies of environmental change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This work is also extensively referenced and reviewed in my book, and offers applicable theoretical perspectives, and an admirable and highly practicable tendency to look to biology and other natural sciences in the reconstruction of complex imperial science links, notably in relation to environmental management, conservation, and national and sub-national institutional issues which go
beyond simple and formal political constructs of empire, and which yield fruitful ideas and information in a range of spatial contexts.(17)

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there are trends in historical geography which have much in common with parallel trends in historical studies that are informing and enlightening imperial and colonial studies. One is the strengthening of critical geopolitical perspectives on imperialism, both in terms of a broadening and deepening of theory and methodology, and reviews of such complex issues as boundary determination, and the mapping of empires.(18) Detailed studies also continue to be produced, by historical geographers and others, of empire-linked institutions such as geographical societies, extensively covered in chapter six of my book, and which both overlap with and go beyond the preferred kinds of ‘modern’ theory and methodology listed in the review.(19)

Future global-scale historical geographies of imperialism and colonialism, though in all probability comparatively rare, will undoubtedly continue to evidence many different ways of tackling the problems encountered in the construction of large-scale postcolonial historical geographies of empire and colony, and some of these, together with smaller-scale studies, published in journals and essay collections, will go some way to help inform the understanding and meet the sort of needs specified by Michael Collins at the end of his helpful and challenging review. In the meantime, my own version, in Geographies of Empire, I feel, makes a modest contribution to this end.

Notes

8. Wilson, op.cit, 566.


18. G. Kearns, Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder (Oxford, 2009); ‘Feature: politics and scale in boundary-making’, special number of the Journal of Historical Geography, 34, 3 (July 2008); The Imperial Map: Cartography and the Mastery of Empire, ed. J. Akerman (Chicago, 2009). Back to (18)


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