


These three titles collectively enrich our picture of empire, and add to understandings of British imperial history. Foster and Du Boulay’s volumes each take as their subject the lives of individuals from British families as these intersected with the drama of world affairs. They come from eminent historians, each of whom draws on a remarkable collection of family archives. They work from these sources to cast fresh light on the daily lives of those Britons who chose to make their lives abroad as part of the fabric of the Empire. The third title comes from a younger historian who examines anti-imperialist modes of thought in Britain in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Stephen Foster and Robin Du Boulay each use the aggregated experiences of a single family—one family from Scotland, the other from England—to reconstruct the world of earlier generations. By setting domestic concerns within a global framework they mesh the homely and the exotic into finely-grained cross-cultural views of imperial history. Their narratives bring different pictures of Britain’s imperial history into focus; placed against customary narratives of commanders-in-chief and high-commissioners they offer a more intimate view of empire. In addition, they provide examples of how private archives can be used creatively to benefit historical understanding.

Stephen Foster, Adjunct Professor at the Australian National University’s Research School of Humanities and the Arts, recounts a history of the British Empire as seen and experienced by six generations of a Perthshire family. *A Private Empire* is largely based on a substantial archive of letters, documents and diaries that are held by the twenty-seventh hereditary chief of the Clan Macpherson of Cluny, Sir William Macpherson. Foster draws out a compelling multigenerational story from these papers, which are kept in the family’s ancestral seat in Blairgowrie. He records the activities of six generations of the family, who contributed to Britain’s empire and its legacies from the late eighteenth century onwards. His book is aptly titled because Britain’s imperial rule is the grand shifting background to the private as well as the public lives the Macphersons led as their search for opportunity and prosperity (and hence respectability) drove them from their origins in the hills.
of Kingussie to India, the West Indies and Australia. Swept along by events in history, and sometimes contributing to them, each generation influenced the next. Unshakeable loyalty to the family and a determination to secure its welfare in the present and the future was central to their activities. Remembrance of home strengthened resolve abroad. Human traits of ambition and frustration, friendship and betrayal, wisdom and folly are recurring (and compelling) aspects of Foster’s sweeping narrative, which skirts broader themes of race and social status within empire.

Foster’s study begins with the adventures of Allan Macpherson (1740–1816), who secured financial independence as an army officer in the East India Company. Difficulties of distance are magnified in the repatriation of one’s foreign gains. Essential reliance on trust was, in his case, abused by kinsman James Macpherson (1736–96), notorious as translator or inventor of the controversial Ossianic poems of 1760–3. Consequently, William Macpherson (1784–1866), Allan’s eldest son, chased a livelihood in the West Indies. He returned with three half-caste children (their mother a slave). In a later post as Clerk of the Councils in New South Wales, Macpherson’s life intersected with that of his Berbice-born son, colonial official Allan Williams (1810–96). Williams settled happily in Australia – unlike his father and Scots-born half-brother (born when his father married in Scotland after returning from Guyana), Allan Macpherson (1818–91). Pioneer squatter on Queensland’s Darling Downs and Scottish laird, Allan Macpherson was easily disaffected. Blairgowrie remained his lodestone but his ambition to recover family fortune eluded him as it eluded his father and grandfather. He earned social standing through participation which he could ill afford in Perthshire community life and as a politician. He sent his sons to Winchester College, a seedbed for imperial servants. His eldest son William Macpherson (1855–1936) went to India.

Robin Du Boulay likewise explores Britain’s imperial past through the experiences of a single family, drawing on archives of his own family. His grandfather, Rev. James T. Houssemayne Du Boulay (1832–1915), was housemaster at Winchester College (1862–93), where he trained boys without connexions (like William Macpherson) to advance themselves to become Britain’s imperial administrators. Poor prospects in Britain and widening opportunities in the Empire took his own children overseas. From the mid-1880s to the end of the First World War they spread across three continents, from the Sudan to China. Fellow Wykehamists were encountered wherever they went.

Drawing from some 800 letters exchanged between six siblings and their parents, Du Boulay offers a memorable glimpse into what he calls the small but layered society which guided the late British Empire. Only one achieved high office, when Sir James Boulay served as Private secretary to Lord Hardinge, viceroy of India (1910–16). His siblings lived less elevated lives: younger brother Dick was a hardscrabble farmer in the Transvaal; the family knew little of what fate befell brother George, a missionary in Central Africa. The youngest of them, Du Boulay’s father Philip, while serving in the Egyptian Labour Corps, entered Jerusalem with Allenby in 1917. Signifying changing imperial relations, he was the first to learn a foreign language.
Robin Du Boulay (1920–2008) was a distinguished medievalist. Professor of Medieval History at the University of London from 1960 to 1982, he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1980. Remarkably his book was published posthumously because his manuscript was rejected in the 1980s by publishers who overlooked what Du Boulay saw: that such close-to-the-ground history adds vital texture to the bigger imperial story. Tony Stockwell, long-serving editor the Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History (1989–2007) notes in his introductory essay that the Du Boulays were attentive to their surroundings. These sibling imperial adventurers maintained a ‘network of affection’ among themselves through their letters; they were hungry for news of each other. The authorial voice of Du Boulay only intervenes to provide background to the historical forces moving rapidly around the correspondents. His book has been rightly acclaimed as an invaluable source for the specialist historian of empire as well as a fascinating portrait of British social history for the general reader.

Mira Matikkala takes as her subject anti-imperialism and Englishness in late Victorian Britain in a book based on her 2006 doctoral thesis. The late nineteenth century was a time of both imperial enthusiasm and discontent. ‘Empire patriotism’ and general ‘empire pride’ were definitive ingredients of British ideas about empire, but late Victorian anti-imperialists understood imperialism differently. They saw little imperial future and their letters, diaries and speeches convey their disquiet over the concept of Greater Britain. British Imperial historians like C. A. Bayly have advocated that Imperial history should address the question of how Imperial experience contributed to the making of national identity and regional identities in the British Isles itself. Matikkala embraces this topic, focusing on anti-imperialist modes of thought in the period 1878–1901. Her embarkation point is Miles Taylor’s examination of ‘how dominion over distant territories affected English character and English institutions’ (‘Imperium et Liberta? Rethinking the Radical Critique of Imperialism during the Nineteenth Century’, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 19, 2 (1991), pp. 1–23). She groups the late-Victorian debate on imperialism loosely into three main categories: economy and imperial expansion; ethics and the nature of progress; and practical politics. Accordingly she divides her book into three parts.

First she examines the two main economic approaches to imperial expansion. One, going back to Adam Smith, maintained that the Empire brought enormous costs to Britain without corresponding benefits. The other approach took the view that the Empire ‘drained’ resources from the dependencies and caused extreme poverty in them. Pacifist and anti-expansionist movements are discussed in connection with close links between expansion and war. Next, debates on economic and imperial expansion that weighed the costs and gains of the Empire are considered as are anti-aggression and anti-war movements, before focus turns to India and the drain theory. When addressing the ethics of imperialism and anti-imperialism, she reflects on arguments over patriotism, ‘loyalty’ and morality. The middle section of the book considers progress and civilization (or ‘degradation and re-barbarisation’), before turning to discussion of old and new liberal anti-imperialism. ‘Old’ Liberalism (represented by the philosopher Herbert Spencer and Liberal MP John Morley)
advocated non-intervention in international and domestic policies; ‘new’ Liberals William Clarke and J.A. Hobson advocated non-intervention in international relations but interventionism in domestic policies. Turning to practical politics she asks how anti-imperialism affected British party politics. Examining the relations between British anti-imperialists and Egyptian and Indian nationalists, she identifies the inconsistencies in their perspectives, particularly in debates on India. She shows how diverse the anti-imperialist stance was, while establishing that anti-imperialism proved to be a unifying spirit that expanded debate on the nature of Britain and its empire. Matikkala draws from manuscript sources like the papers of John Bright; of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (perhaps the most famous late-Victorian anti-imperialist); and of generally less familiar figures, such as the Indian nationalist and Liberal MP, Dadabhai Naoroji. She also draws heavily on contemporary printed primary sources, arguing that pamphlets and periodical reviews were the main forums for debating structural questions about imperialism and Britain’s empire. By concentrating on public debate, she emphasises active critical publicists and contributors to the public sphere crowd her pages. Besides Spencer and Morley, these include ‘Little Englanders’ like social campaigner William Digby (1849–1904); libertarian Henry Labouchere; and temperance campaigner Sir Wilfrid Lawson. Other anti-imperialists who appear in the book include positivists, such as Frederic Harrison (1831–1923) and Richard Congreve, and ‘New Liberals’, in particular the socialist journalist William Clarke (1852–1901).

Such a large cast of characters is used to demonstrate that British attitudes towards the Empire were complex; the terms imperialism, anti-imperialism, and the British Empire were often used inconsistently. She makes clear the confusion that persisted among contemporaries. Indeed, she attributes the lack of a significant anti-imperialist movement in Britain at the time to the lack of common ground held by these various critics. Victorian anti-imperialists distinguished between the Empire and imperialism. Anti-imperialism rarely meant opposition to the British Empire as such. The Empire signified mainly emigration, colonization, and the spontaneous spread of English liberal values in the form of the settler Empire. While the colonies propounded a liberal spirit, British authoritarian rule in the dependencies (that is, imperialism as they understood it) negated this spirit. They regarded imperialism as a negative departure in British politics, representing anti-constitutionalism, ‘distorted’ imperial patriotism, militarism, aggression and irrational jingoism. Anti-imperialists emphasised ‘the long line from 1688’: liberty and constitutional rights in the form of industry and freedom at home, and peace, fair dealing, and moderation abroad. Viewing these as traditional English values, which constituted ‘true’ Englishness, late-Victorian Anti-imperialists argued that ‘true’ patriotism would be founded on these values and thus allied empire and imperial ambition to liberty and Englishness. In analysing these intellectual and political arguments, Mattikala enriches the picture of late-Victorian attitudes and contributes to British intellectual and political history. As with the other volumes under review, her book asks us to view the imperial past with fresh eyes.

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