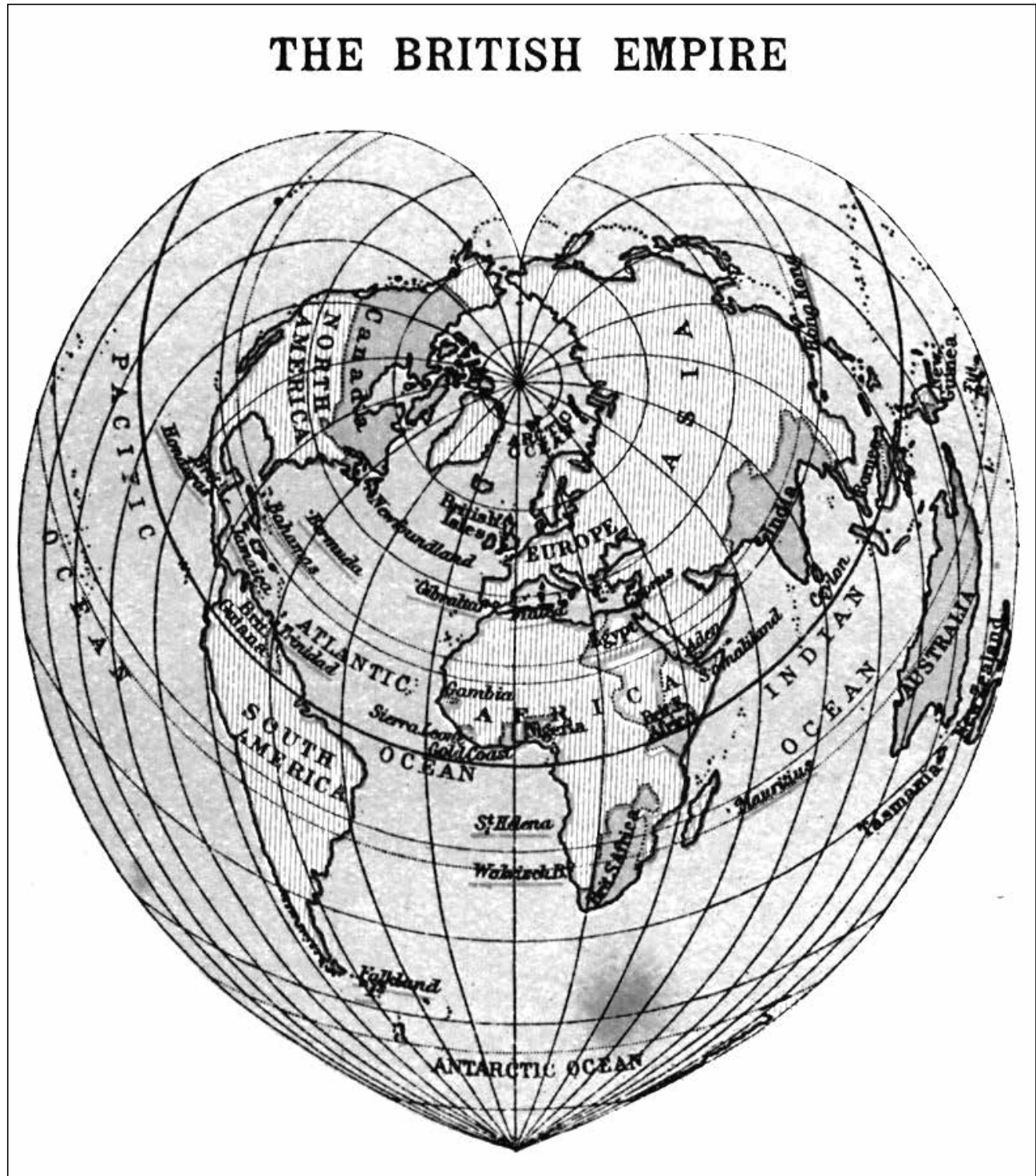


**British Empire**

Stéphanie Prévost and Iain Sharpe introduce this special issue of the Journal.

# Liberal Politics and Empire



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN liberalism and empire over time is a vexed and complex one – one that has provoked intense debates about how the relationship should be understood. Liberals can be pulled in opposite directions. Their belief in universal values of freedom and justice can lead to a sense that these values can be exported globally – if necessary, through empire. At the same time liberalism’s commitment to peace and non-aggression often made Liberals critics and opponents of imperial expansion.

The study of the interaction between Liberal politics and empire has certainly not been without heated debate. As long ago as the 1950s, the work of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher challenged the prevalent idea that the ‘free trade’ policy of nineteenth-century Liberals was essentially pacific and anti-imperial. In their 1953 article ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, they argued that the expansion of global trade led first to informal control of new territories and, otherwise, where this was not possible, to formal annexation. Thus, they argued, free trade drove extension of empire. This led to counterarguments highlighting the opposition of free trade’s nineteenth century champions, such as Cobden and Bright, to imperial expansion.<sup>1</sup>

More recently Uday Singh Mehta’s *Liberalism and Empire* (1999) challenged the myth that liberalism necessarily was anti-imperial in nature and practice. In a postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism, Mehta examined the work of key liberal thinkers on India, especially across the eighteenth to twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Mehta reassessed the thought of John Stuart Mill, with reference to his lifelong position as colonial administrator at the East India

Company (1823–1858) at a time when Britain tightened her grip over India. Mill’s disdain for Indian culture and belief that Britain’s role was to inculcate Indian people with European values was contrasted with less triumphalist view of that earlier renegade liberal, Edmund Burke.<sup>3</sup>

Mehta’s arguments have proved controversial, possibly because they appeared to portray Mill – who retains an enduring status as a role-model for many modern liberals – in a negative light. Several historians have insisted that *Liberalism and Empire* was rather ahistorical, lacking in nuance and failing to recognise the evolution of liberalism or the ambivalent views of eighteenth-century proto-liberals like Smith, Bentham or Kant towards imperial conquest and domination.<sup>4</sup> It has led to Mill’s ideas about empire being examined anew, given the attention he paid to a variety of imperial contexts (India, Ireland, Jamaica, and settler colonies including those in Australia and New Zealand) and ‘the internal tensions in Mill’s theoretical project’ whereby the endorsement of racial supremacy inherent within his liberal imperialism coexisted with his defence of individual rights in domestic Britain.<sup>5</sup>

Duncan Bell has analysed these tensions against the backdrop of British visions of world order and how these impacted relations with British colonies (Dominions, India and Crown colonies) and the USA – and how those then shaped political models for empire.<sup>6</sup> Another line of studies focuses on Liberal/Radical critics of empire, who contested imperialism or, more often, fought for fairer representation within the British empire (for example, the joint advocacy of Irish home rule and Indian autonomy), sometimes by activating contacts outside of the British empire.<sup>7</sup>

These are mainly academic controversies, but, in recent decades, empire and its legacies have increasingly become part of political debate. Given the importance of empire

The British Empire in 1920. (Adapted from ‘The British Empire’, *Asprey’s Atlas of the World* (Asprey and Co., Ltd., 1920). Map courtesy FCIT; <https://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/5400/5488/5488.htm>.)

and imperial questions during the great era of British Liberalism in the nineteenth century, it is unsurprising that contemporary questions of Britain's imperial legacy will involve debate about the reputation of prominent Lib-

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erals. We have seen this most recently in public discussion about the connections of Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone to slavery and the Gladstone family's apology for this.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps less well known is that Cecil Rhodes, whose reputation has come under scrutiny through the Rhodes Must Fall campaign in Britain,<sup>9</sup> was, perhaps surprisingly, a donor to both the Liberal Party and the Irish Parliamentary Party – arising from his support for colonial self-government within the empire.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2015, and perhaps more than ever following Brexit and Black Lives Matter in 2020, the British empire has been at the centre of an unprecedented culture war in Britain. This does often descend into a binary 'good thing versus bad thing', with, on the one hand, works exposing the continuing effect of imperial violence on today's Britain and the resurgence of neoliberal imperialism,<sup>11</sup> and, at the opposite end, others downplaying or even denying the violence and racism inherent in the imperial/colonial enterprise in order to uphold its civilisational value, or justify some form of 'Empire-lite' military intervention in the context of failed/failing states (such as Iraq in 2003).<sup>12</sup> These, in turn, have led to further works specifically addressing these arguments'.<sup>13</sup>

We have attempted to avoid making this special issue another skirmish in the imperial history wars, although it is touched on through the discussion of Sir John Seeley and

through William Wallace's review of Catherine Elkins's *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (2022). But its *raison d'être* is elsewhere. Drawing on the words of British public historian and writer David Olusoga in 'The Cotton Capital Project' – a research project examining both *The Guardian's* origins as a radical paper born out of Peterloo (1819) and its link to slavery – that

'two things can be true at the same time', the editors of this special issue call for a vigilant approach history so as to help us understand Liberal attitudes to empire and confront their contradictions – not explain them away or gloss over them.<sup>14</sup> This critical reading forms the basis of the articles and reviews in this special issue.

The connection between Liberal politics and empire is a vast subject, with even the various themes and works mentioned above barely scratching the surface. So, we cannot hope in a single issue of this journal to cover all aspects of this theme. However, the contributions do each address an aspect of the Liberal Party's engagement with empire that we hope will be of interest to readers and leave them wanting to find out more.

Jonathan Parry tackles the political thought of the historian Sir John Seeley, author of *The Expansion of England* (1883), which popularised a liberal vision of empire and was famously an influence on the Liberal imperialist ideas of future prime minister Lord Rosebery. While Seeley has become embroiled in modern culture wars, including a campaign to rename Cambridge University's history library which bears his name, Professor Parry places his thinking in its nineteenth century context.

Using quantitative history and the digital history text mining tool across a mass corpus of Liberal Party speeches printed in the

local and national newspapers between 1880 and 1914, Luke Blaxill considers the impact of empire on Liberal electoral fortunes. He devotes particular attention to the recurring idea of ‘sane imperialism’ in that corpus and shows that it was most clearly brandished in the Liberals’ response to Joseph Chamberlain’s tariff reform campaign (1906 general election), which was portrayed as destabilising and dangerous. The Liberals thereby turned the table on the Unionists who, six years earlier, had inflicted on them a catastrophic electoral defeat in the 1900 general election, which took place against the background of the second imperial war in South Africa against the Dutch Boers.

Martin Pugh surveys the evolving attitudes of Liberals towards India from the early nineteenth century through to independence in 1947. This stretches from the patronising attitudes of Mills and Macaulay who assumed that Britain’s role was to train the Indian population in European values, then the loss of confidence in this reform process after the uprising of 1857, and finally the subsequent roles of such diverse Liberal figures as Edwin Montagu, Sir John Simon and Lord Reading in the road to Indian independence.

Stéphanie Prévost describes the interaction between liberalism, humanitarianism and imperialism by the post-Gladstonian era ‘ethical Liberals’, looking in particular at the

reactions to the Armenian massacres of the 1890s and the South African war of 1899–1902, and the tensions in both cases between the belief in non-intervention and the desire to play a constructive role in resolving these crises.

Richard Toye considers the history of Liberal attitudes towards empire and commonwealth through the prism of general election manifestos from 1900 to 1979. He argues that while Liberals were not indifferent to imperial and commonwealth affairs, such things were less important to them than they were to the Conservatives, perhaps explaining why the party was able to adapt to the end of empire and support greater European integration after the Second World War.<sup>15</sup>

These articles are supplemented by reviews of recent works on the interaction between Liberal politics and empire. William Wallace considers Caroline Elkins’ important new history of the British empire, *Legacy of Violence* (2022), which exposes the contradictions between the liberal rhetoric about England’s ‘civilising mission’ and the systemic violence that established and maintained imperial rule. Andy Cabot reviews Michael Taylor’s *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* (2021), a work on resistance to the abolition of slavery from the 1823 Demerara rebellion to the passing of the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, which

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## Further reading

- Further reading on empire from recent editions of the *Journal of Liberal History*:
  - John Powell, ‘William Gladstone and the question of slavery, 1832–33’, 120 (Autumn 2023).
  - Peter Hain, ‘Stop the Tour!’, 118 (Spring 2023).
  - Brendon Jones, ‘Herbert Lewis and the South African war, 1899–1902’, 117 (Winter 2022–23).
  - Tom Axworthy and Lorna Marsden, ‘The Long-Lived Liberal Party of Canada’, 102 (Spring 2019).
  - Iain Sharpe, review of Alan Lester, Kate Boehme and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-century British Empire*, 115 (Summer 2022).
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## Liberal Politics and Empire

emphasises the ambivalent motives behind the abolition movement in that decade. Iain Sharpe critiques Christopher Taylor's *Empire of Neglect: The West Indies in the wake of British Liberalism* (2018), which discusses a lesser-known aspect of empire, the relative lack of interest held by British society and politicians in its Caribbean colonies during much of the nineteenth century.

We hope not only that readers will enjoy the articles and reviews in this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, but that it may lead to future contributions on this vast and fascinating subject. ■

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Dr Iain Sharpe studied history at Leicester and London Universities, completing a doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party in the Edwardian era. He was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford for thirty years.

- 1 John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson 'The imperialism of free trade', *Economic History Review*, 6:1 (1953), pp. 1–15; Oliver MacDonagh, 'The Anti-Imperialism of Free Trade', 14:3, *The Economic History Review*, pp. 489–501. See also Louis, William Roger, Ronald Robinson, and John Gallagher (eds.), *Imperialism: The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New Viewpoints, 1976) and Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The official mind of imperialism* (Macmillan, 1961).
- 2 Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A study in nineteenth-century British Liberal thought* (The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 20. For a more radical attack of Liberalism, see Bhikhu Parekh, 'Decolonizing Liberalism', in Alexander Shtromas (ed.), *The End Of 'Isms'?: Reflections on the fate of ideological politics after Communism's collapse* (Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 85–103.
- 3 Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford University Press, 1994).
- 4 For example, the review article by Andrew Sartori, 'The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission', *The Journal of Modern History*, 78:3 (2006), pp. 623–42. See also: Sankar Muhtu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Donald Winch, 'Bentham on Colonies and Empire', *Utilitas*, 9:1 (1997), pp. 147–54; Barbara Arneil, 'Jeremy Bentham: Pauperism, Colonialism, and Imperialism', *American Political Science Review*, 115:4 (2021), pp. 1147–58.
- 5 As a complement to Zastoupil, see especially: Karuna Mantena, 'Mill and the Imperial Predicament', in Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (eds.), *J. S. Mill's Political Thought: A bicentennial reassessment* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 317; Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, pp. 150–9; essays by Georgios Varouxakis, David Theo Goldberg, J. Joseph Miller and H. S. Jones in Bart Schultz and Georgios Varouxakis (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Empire* (Lanham, MD, 2005); Mark Tunick, 'Tolerant imperialism: John Stuart Mill's defence of British rule in India', *The Review of Politics*, 68 (2006), pp. 586–611; Katherine Smits, 'John Stuart Mill on the Antipodes: Settler violence against indigenous peoples and the legitimacy of colonial rule', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 54:1 (2008), pp. 1–15.
- 6 Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the future of world order, 1860–1900* (Princeton University Press, 2007); Duncan Bell (ed.), *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and international relations in nineteenth-century political thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Reprint edn., Princeton University Press, 2016); Duncan Bell (ed.), *Empire, Race, and Global Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and utopian destiny of Anglo-America* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Duncan Bell, 'John Stuart Mill on Federation, Civilization and Empire', *History of Political Thought*, forthcoming 2024.
- 7 Alongside seminal, early works by Bernard Porter – *Critics of Empire: British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism in*

- Africa, 1815–1914* (Macmillan, 1968) – and R. J. Hind – *Henry Labouchère and the Empire, 1880–1905* (Athlone Press, 1972) – see also: Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre, *Cosmopolitan Nationalism in the Victorian Empire: Ireland, India and the politics of Alfred Webb* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Dinyar Patel, *Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism* (Harvard University Press and Harper Collins India, 2020) and accompanying website <https://dinyarpatel.com/naoroji/letter-box/> including correspondence on Liberalism and Empire; Vikram Visana, *Uncivil Liberalism: Labour, capital and commercial society in Dadabhai Naoroji's political thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- 8 See, for example, Jonathan Smith and Paul Lashmar, 'How William Gladstone defended his father's role in slavery', *The Guardian*, 19 Aug. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/19/william-gladstone-family-of-former-british-pm-to-apologise-for-links-to-slavery> (accessed 3 Mar. 2024).
- 9 For a statement of the movement: Roseanne Chantiluke, Brian Kwoba and Athinangamso (eds.), *Rhodes Must Fall: The struggle to decolonise the racist heart of Empire* (Zed Books, 2018).
- 10 Thomas Mohr, 'Irish Home Rule and Constitutional Reform in the British Empire, 1885–1914', *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, xxiv:2 (2019), <https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/3900#authors>.
- 11 Colin Mooers (ed.), *The New Imperialists: Ideologies of Empire* (Oneworld Publications, 2006); Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British did to India* (Penguin Books, 2018); Robert Gildea, *Empires of the Mind: The colonial past and the politics of the present* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Catherine Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A history of the British Empire* (Penguin, 2022).
- 12 In particular: Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (Vintage, 2003); Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the modern world* (Penguin, 2004); Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the rest* (Penguin, 2011); Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A moral reckoning* (William Collins, 2023).
- 13 For example: Dane Kennedy, *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch (eds), *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Robert Saunders, 'Brexit and Empire: "Global Britain" and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48:6 (2020), pp. 1140–74.
- 14 'David Olusoga on *The Guardian's* links to slavery: "That reality can't be negotiated with"', *The Guardian*, video, 28 Mar. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/video/2023/mar/28/david-olusoga-examines-the-guardians-links-to-slavery-that-reality-cant-be-negotiated-with>. See also James McDougall, 'The history of empire isn't about pride – or guilt', *The Guardian*, 3 Jan. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/03/history-empire-pride-guilt-truth-oxford-nigel-biggar>.
- 15 On Liberalism and decolonisation, see the special issue of *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 46: 5 (2018), edited by Harshan Kumarasingham, especially the introduction 'Liberal Ideals and the Politics of Decolonisation'; and Peter Hain's 'Stop the Tour!' on his experiences in the Young Liberals fighting apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s, *Journal of Liberal History*, 118 (2023).

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