

Reviews

This makes for uncomfortable reading for British Liberals, however much we see ourselves as forming part of the 'vocal minority' who challenged at least part of the violence embedded in imperial rule. Some may consider the absence of any comparison with the record of other 'civilising' empires to imply that Britain was an exceptionally brutal imperial power. France, with its 'mission civilatrice' (and its brutal war in Algeria and tragic legacy in Indochina) is the most directly comparable; the USA, with its rhetoric of anti-imperialism and of 'making the world safe for democracy' – undermined by its record in the Philippines and in Central America,

and by its treatment of Amerindians and former slaves within its own expanding territories – has been as hypocritical as the UK. Elkins' interpretation of the 1941 Atlantic Charter as a set of principles which Roosevelt believed in, but its British drafters did not, seems unbalanced. Peter Ricketts's account of its negotiation (in *Hard Choices*, 2021) concludes that both sides agreed its heady rhetoric without thinking through its implications for their own policies.

Liberal empire, the book insists, has been a contradiction in terms. That has been the British experience, but also the French and American. The Anglo-American invasion of

Iraq was, Professor Elkins remarks, a further surge of the exceptionalist myth that order and progress could be imposed on other cultures through violence. Whether the British, or French or American, legacy of empire is any better than the Belgian, Dutch, Russian or Turkish remains for other historians to contest. ■

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Empire, slavery and trade

Christopher Taylor, *Empire of Neglect: The West Indies in the Wake of British Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2018)

Review by Iain Sharpe

'O hear a suffering planter's cry, who groans against free trade; And do believe him when he says, no sugar can be made.'

Thus began 'The Planter's Lament', written by the now long-forgotten author Cyril Francis Perkins from the viewpoint of West Indian sugar planters in the wake of the 1846 Sugar Duties Act. Introduced by Whig Prime Minister Lord John Russell, this piece of legislation abolished preferential tariffs on sugar imported to Britain from the West Indies. In a stroke this reduced their importance to the British economy and led to the sense of imperial

neglect that is the subject of this book. In many ways this free trade measure, rather than the more widely known abolition of slavery in 1834, was the seminal event in the history of Britain's Caribbean empire in the nineteenth century.

While the word 'empire', for good reason, conjures up notions of power, conquest and domination, deeper study of British imperialism brings us up against alternative currents. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this included concepts such as 'informal empire', 'trusteeship' and 'indirect rule'. In this earlier period, for the century after Adam Smith

argued in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that Britain should divest itself of colonies, there was a distinct liberal sentiment in British politics that opposed imperial expansion, even if this did not stop the acquisition of new territories.

Dr Taylor's book highlights how this liberalising agenda drove at least some of the empire's subjects in the West Indies to a feeling of being abandoned by the imperial government. The author acknowledges that an expectation, when embarking on this study, of finding emerging independence movements in the Caribbean during this period gave way to a realisation

that what many craved was more attention and sympathy from the metropolitan government. The book therefore looks at responses to this perceived neglect and how at least some looked to the Americas as a counterpoint to a sense of being abandoned by Britain.

Dr Taylor is a professor of English, and this is a literary rather than political study, involving a close reading of a range of texts, from a widowed eighteenth-century planter's correspondence through early novels by authors based in the West Indies to the more famous autobiography of Mary Seacole which recounted her experiences in, first, Panama and then the Crimean War. Such an approach has the advantage of recovering forgotten voices, although it does leave open the question of how representative of wider opinion these writers of letters, articles, novels and memoirs were.

Nonetheless the examples offered provide interesting perspectives. The plantation owner attempts to compensate for relative powerlessness in selling her sugar in British markets by trying to imbue in her London-based agent a sense of shared enterprise and obligation. In the wake of the Sugar Duties Act, a white absentee planter argues that the abolition of slavery should have required the retention of protection to give Britain's West Indian empire a chance of economic prosperity. He highlighted the irony that Britons now bought cheap slave-grown sugar from Cuba and Brazil and sought to shock the government in London into a more constructive approach by predicting the absorption of the West

Indies into a United States that would reimpose slavery.

In contrast, two of Dr Taylor's subjects see a positive alternative to Britain's imperial neglect. In his novel *Emmanuel Appadocca*, the author Michel Maxwell Philip, himself the son of a black mother and a white planter, channelled his experience of paternal abandonment to write a tale of a mixed-race son's turn to piracy in order to take revenge on the white father who disowned him. Philip portrayed the protagonist as finding a more beneficent environment in Venezuela than in the British West Indies. Also highlighted is the case of the journalist George Des Sources, editor of the *Trinidadian* newspaper, who abandoned his home island to attempt to build a socialist colony in Venezuela.

Perhaps one weakness is that the voices of slaves and former slaves are not greatly represented. An exception is the example of James Williams, whose book *Narrative of Events since August 1834* exposed the so-called 'apprenticeship' system whereby former slaves were required to work for a number of years for their former masters, sometimes in worse circumstances since the end of slavery meant that the latter no longer felt any paternalistic duty of care. Williams briefly achieved a degree of celebrity, yet in a cruelly ironic twist his patron, the abolitionist campaigner Joseph Sturge, was soon treating him much like a chattel. Sturge brought Williams to London but complained that the attention he had received and the 'comparatively idle life' he was now living had 'produced an unfavourable effect' that could only



be remedied by being 'compelled to labour for his bread'.

While this volume offers a valuable alternative perspective on liberalism and empire, if a reviewer's prime duty is to advise on whether or not to read the book, I must warn would-be readers it is heavily laden with what I take to be the jargon of literary criticism to the point of being almost wilfully opaque. For example, when Mary Seacole sets up a hotel for wounded officers in the Crimean War after her application to serve as a nurse was rejected, it is rendered as follows: 'Seacole's racial foreclosure from the affective circuitry of imperial citizenship impels her to resume, once again, her career as a hotelier and sutler.' That is not an exception but an all-too-typical representation of the author's prose style. So, while there are rewards to be had in this book, the reader has to work very hard indeed to reap them. ■

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