

The Creation of a British World: British Empire Sentimentality, c. 1815–1869

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Introduction

Throughout its history, the attitudes of ordinary British people towards the Empire were vitally important to its very survival.¹ Yet historians have traditionally seen few positive attitudes predating the explosion of imperialism in the late-nineteenth century.² Bernard Porter, for example, argues that most were either ignorant of, or ambivalent towards the Empire.³ However, this argument mistakenly ignores the mass of British people who migrated to the settler colonies in the early to mid-nineteenth century, on the assumption that they ceased to be British when they left the UK.⁴

It is the attitudes of these marginalised Britons, between c. 1815 and 1869, which are explored here; overall, this research seeks to explain when, how, and why a sentimental attitude towards the Empire developed in the nineteenth century settler colonies.

Sources and Methodology

Given the contemporary incoherence of the British Empire, explanations of sentimentality are not simple, nor universally applicable. Thus the attitudes of Britons in Canada, South Africa, and Australasia are examined in isolation. This is largely achieved through the qualitative analysis of colonial accounts – books by settlers, outlining their Empire experiences. Though these sources are not wholly representative of colonial populations, written by educated white men, they nonetheless often represent the best evidence available, as few women or non-whites, for example, recorded their experiences. Therefore these make up the majority of primary sources examined here, combining with some others to demonstrate and explain nineteenth century Empire sentimentality in the three main locations of colonial settlement.

Results

Canada

A number of sources produced between 1815 and 1865 reveal a long-running appreciation of the so-called United Empire Loyalists who had, during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, repelled American advances into Canada.⁵ This created a national myth, inextricably tied up with the saviour of the British World in North America, around which sentimentality could form.



This medal, awarded to 1812 war veterans, shows the importance of the USA in strengthening sentimental attitudes towards the British Empire. The eagle represented the USA and its culture, diametrically opposed to the English lion and Canadian beaver, which together represented British culture.⁶

The early work of the loyalists in saving the British World in North America was enthusiastically built upon by subsequent generations of settlers. For example, gothic-style architecture was employed for prestigious buildings such as Universities and Parliaments, as it was in England.⁷ The building of Christian churches also demonstrated the recreation of Britain abroad, which could be seen as a sentimental response to the Empire as a whole.⁸

South Africa

Christianity was central to the development of Empire sentimentality in South Africa. Of particular importance was the opportunity provided by the Empire to missionaries to spread British Christianity to uncivilised natives, both within and outside of colonial borders.⁹

However it was not just the creation of a British World, but perceptions of a pre-existing neo-Britain in Africa which could inspire sentimentality. For example, the mountainous landscape of the Cape Colony brought Scottish settlers in 1820 to tears, due to its resemblance to home.¹⁰

Australasia

The continued Britishness of settlers in Australasia was evident in references to Britain as the “mother country,” and to New Zealand as the “Britain of the South.”¹¹



“News from Home” by George Baxter demonstrates further connections between settlers in Australasia and the wider British World, maintained through correspondence.¹²

These feelings translated into attempts to extend the British World, which fed sentimentality. These attempts could be minute – Sydney’s Botanic Garden for instance.¹³ Many, on the other hand, were large-scale replications, but deliberation over the extent of replication also allowed room for individuals with varying ideas to feel a part of the colonial cloning experience. This was most evident in debates over the need for an unelected upper house in New South Wales’ political system.¹⁴ Therefore, a large number of settlers in mid-nineteenth century Australasia drew Empire sentiment from the opportunity to create a British World in the South Pacific.

Conclusion

When, how, and why did Empire sentimentality develop in the nineteenth century British colonies? Due to the differing histories of Canada, South Africa, and Australasia, the answers to these questions are individual to each location. In Canada, sentimentality was drawn from the shared myth of loyalists, and the mutual desire not to let their actions be in vain. In South Africa, similarities of the landscape to Britain stirred up emotion, as did the belief that spreading Christianity was genuinely beneficial to the natives.¹⁵ Australasian settlers, on the other hand, became sentimental about their individual ideas of what would best make a neo-Britain, and the resulting recreations of British societies abroad.

These results alone call into question traditional views that settlers ceased to be British when they left the UK, and that positive British attitudes did not develop until the late-nineteenth century.¹⁶ They also lend themselves to further research into cultural recreation and assimilation in the increasingly multicultural modern world. However, they also demonstrate a general theme which can explain the development of Empire sentimentality between c. 1815 and 1869 – the creation of a British World.

References

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