

Review - British World Policy and the Projection of Global Power, c.1830-1960

Written by John W. Young

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British World Policy and the Projection of Global Power, c.1830-1960

Edited by T. G. Otte

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This collection of twelve essays, by eminent international historians from Canada, Britain and America, focuses on how Great Britain maintained its influence on a truly global scale though most of the nineteenth and half of the twentieth centuries. In addition, it investigates how such global commitments complicated the projection of imperial power. It is dedicated to the memory of Keith Neilson, a historian who devoted much of his career to charting Anglo-Russian relations through the half century before the Second World War. He passed away in 2015, less than a year after retiring from the Royal Military College (RMC) of Canada. Alongside numerous other publications, Neilson co-authored *The Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 1854-1956* with his friend Thomas Otte, the editor of this memorial volume. In 1991, Neilson published an influential article, “Greatly exaggerated”: The Myth of the Decline of Great Britain before 1914’, in the *International History Review*, which was a significant inspiration for this collection of essays. This article, along with three others by Canadian historians in the 1991 special issue, called into question the idea that Britain’s international power in the first half of the twentieth century should be characterised as an economics-driven ‘decline’.

These articles did not deny that British power was increasingly challenged, or that there was a relative economic decline compared to other powers, but they argued that economic difficulties could be offset by other elements, including diplomatic skill and alliances, and that Britain remained the key global power until the Second World War, with the world’s largest navy and Empire. One of those authors, John Ferris, appears in this collection, writing on Britain’s War Trade Intelligence Department in the First World War, which shows the importance of information-gathering and intelligence work for prosecuting the blockade of Germany in ways that minimised the harm to British relations with other powers. Otte gives the volume cohesion by focusing it around the persistence of British global power over more than a century, developing many of the themes explored in the 1991 special issue and emphasising, in his introductory essay, the importance of studying ‘the full panoply of British power in its global setting’ (p.23).

The collection is certainly a diverse one in many respects, even if the timespan covered is rather narrower than the book title suggests (with only one essay having much to say on events after 1941). In terms of geographical spread it is truly global, though some chapters have a particular emphasis, such as that by Hamish Ion, one of Neilson’s colleagues at the RMC, who looks at the role of the Japanese treaty port of Yokohama as a hub for British imperial influence in the late 19th century – as well as being a naval base and trade centre, it was from there that ‘British cultural, social, sporting and industrial ideas were transmitted into... Japanese society’ (p.68). Or Dominic Lieven’s investigation of ‘Britain through Russian eyes’ in the early twentieth century – a subject sure to have interested Neilson – which focuses on the shifting views of Russian elites towards Britain’s role in the international system, especially the possibility of using it to deter German expansionism. Economics is by no means ignored: aside from the Ferris chapter, there is Kathleen Burk’s investigation of commercial and financial ties between Britain and South America, which suggests that economic power mattered, in that the formidable networks established by British

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businesses and banks in the continent during the nineteenth century could not help but crumble in the face of the burgeoning might of the United States in the 1920s.

But the 'panoply of British power' also included less conventional factors, such as the population's readiness to fight in two major wars, an issue addressed by Zara Steiner (another co-author of a book with Neilson and, sadly, no longer with us). Moreover, co-operation with the Dominions, is a theme explored in two essays. Douglas Delaney, another of Neilson's RMC colleagues, focuses on the Imperial General Staff in the inter-war period, when military relations were 'sometimes badly frayed... but they never broke' (p.244). Likewise, Kent Fedorowich, writes on the abortive Imperial Conference of 1941, whose story highlights the decentralised nature of the Commonwealth and the inability of most of its leaders to establish a close relationship with Winston Churchill (the exception being South Africa's Jan Smuts). Another vital element in the panoply, as discussed by Otte himself, was the 'nerve centre' provided by the Foreign Office, although its knowledge and expertise could not prevent the growth of competing centres of power in Whitehall, especially after 1914, with the author commenting that, 'Its decline ... mirrored the decline of Britain' (p.110). Closely related to this is Erik Goldstein's look at British ambassadors in the inter-war years, when the professionalism of the Diplomatic Service was threatened by a tendency to politicise it, not least by bringing in non-career diplomats to fill key posts.

The range of this volume does not end there. It includes essays that cover a broad time-scale, notably David French's study of the meaning of the term 'minimum force necessary' in British counterinsurgency operations, from the Indian Mutiny to 1960s Aden. He finds it to have been an 'elastic concept' and a 'convenient shield' that hid some unpleasant realities (pp.64-5). There are more detailed case studies, such as G. Bruce Strang's concluding piece on the problems the British found in trying to enforce sanctions on Japan over its war on China in 1937. It is shown that the British were well aware of the economic limits on their ability to restrain Tokyo, but sought to protect their position in the Far East by persuading Washington that its interests were also being menaced there. While Ferris and Delaney deal with military issues, John Maurer turns attention to the navy, with a discussion of the German challenge before the First World War. Fittingly, he echoes Neilson's argument that in 1914, 'Britain was no weary titan but a formidable Great Power, fully capable of competing in the international rivalries of that troubled age...' (p.173). It is one of the strong points of the book that, for all the diversity of geographical spread or thematic content, it hangs together very well, because of that central focus around the global nature of British power. Otte, who already has plenty of experience with edited works, is to be praised for forging a high-calibre team united in a coherent project, while the contributors deserve praise for the primary research that has gone into these essays, some of them being based on archival research in three different countries. My main quibble was that they should have done more to draw into their chapters a discussion of the rich historiography that surrounds the subjects they explore, an exercise that would have helped highlight the originality of their own work. But, the overall quality of this volume is superior to many collections of the festschrift type, because of the central theme that ties it together and the consistently high quality of the research and ideas apparent in every piece. One gets a real sense that Otte and his colleagues wanted to do full justice to Keith Neilson's memory and that he would have been happy with what they have achieved.

About the author:

John W. Young was Professor of International History at the University of Nottingham from 2000 to 2020 and is now Professor Emeritus there. His latest books are *David Bruce and Diplomatic Practice: an American Ambassador in London, 1961-69* and *International Relations since 1945: a global history* (co-authored with John Kent). He has also published a number of articles on British decision-making during the July Crisis, some of which are available via open access: Conservative leaders, coalition, and Britain's decision for war in 1914, Emotions and the British government's decision for war in 1914, Lewis Harcourt's Journal of the 1914 War Crisis, Ambassador George Buchanan and the July Crisis.