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Imperial Publishers And The Idea Of Colonial History, 1870-1916

Leslie Howsam

Abstract

Drawing on correspondence in their archives, this article discusses British publishers' engagement with the problem of colonial history from the 1870s to 1916. This was the period when history was becoming professionalized but, apart from J.R. Seeley, few academic historians were writing marketable books on imperial subjects. The publishers turned instead to colonial administrators or journalists while failing to recognize the originality of texts by colonists themselves. The methodology is a juxtaposition of historiographical issues with those raised by scholarship in the history of the book and print culture. The publishing history of Seeley's *Expansion of England* (Macmillan, 1883) is followed by three case studies concerning imperial narratives in English publishing houses: Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, and Macmillan & Co. The central argument is that the agency of publishers in the composition and conceptualization, as well as the marketing, of colonial histories has been neglected. The essay nuances the debates about early imperial historiography and enriches book-history scholarship by extending its methodologies to non-fictional sources.

In the spring of 1916, the Delegates and staff of the Clarendon Press at Oxford University solicited manuscripts for a new inexpensive series of short histories of the British colonies and colonial development. In the midst of the First World War, both Oxford and Cambridge University Presses as well as a number of commercial publishers were anxious to engage the subject of colonial history but their demand met with a limited supply. The Oxford University Press (OUP) turned to Reginald Coupland (1884-1952), the University's Beit Lecturer in colonial history, who replied that

A series of good short books on the colonies is tremendously needed. The difficulty, as you doubtless recognize, is to get them well written. The whole subject of Colonial History has been so much neglected that very few people in this country would be qualified to write. But in all the colonies there must be young & capable professors or assistant professors of history who doubtless have to teach the history of the colony they live in & ought therefore to be able to write the books you want. (Oxford

University Press [OUP] Archives CP/ED/001166)

This fragment of correspondence illuminates the themes of this present study: Britain's academic historians were not meeting the demand of readers for histories of the British world. They had neglected the subject in favour of other matters more compatible with their historiographical agenda. This state of affairs being unlikely to change, some people argued that colonial history should be referred to the colonies themselves where competent academics could be relied upon to maintain disciplinary standards while cultivating a parochial interest not expected of historians in the metropolis.

Behind Coupland's (and OUP's) assessment of the situation was forty years' experience with changing historiographical trends in the context of intense imperial excitement. Committed as they were to establishing more rigorous "scientific" standards for historical scholarship, the university-based historians, with one notable exception, had not conceived of the British world as a historical problematic. The European world of modern Germany and France, and ancient Greece and Rome, had claimed the most attention. The publishers and editors of history books found themselves in search of narratives that included historical and contemporary knowledge of imperial expansion and colonial experience. They learned to seek these narratives outside of academe from colonial civil servants or journalists. At the same time, publishers overlooked another body of narratives written by people who had lived in colonial settings and developed a powerful, although non-academic, historical sensibility about their own places in the world.

Historians have often been credited with a share in the popular sense of a British world that included both the United Kingdom and the Empire (Louis; Heathorn 56-84; 245-51; Hall 20-4). Sir John Seeley's 1883 *The Expansion of England* was interpreted as a manifesto of colonization (Hall 1-3) but readers for the most part ignored the book's inherent theoretical agenda which was Seeley's insistence on the scientific character of the discipline of history (Wormell; Burroughs). James Anthony Froude's *Oceania* (1886) was imperial too, but in a different key. As a narrative historian, Froude's version of the past looked back to the literary school of Macaulay and Carlyle; Seeley abjured all that and called upon his students and peers at Cambridge to do likewise.

The period of intense imperial excitement in Britain from the 1880s to the First World War was also a time of transition in the universities when Seeley and others undertook the project of professionalization. They set themselves in opposition to such popular, readable, "delightful" (the term of scorn is Seeley's) narratives as Froude's. They drew their inspiration from Leopold von Ranke and delved in archival repositories for documents that would evidence the truth about the past. They created a refereed scholarly journal, the *English Historical Review*, to publish their work (Howsam 2004). They established other partnerships with publishers to bring out the monographs, editions of documents, and reference works they regarded as necessary. For the most part, these did not include colonial histories.

In W.R. Louis' introduction to Volume Five of the controversial new *Oxford History of the British Empire* (1999), the historiography of imperial history or British expansion begins with the texts – first Seeley and Froude and their contemporaries, with a glance backward to the few things said about Empire by Macaulay and his predecessors and then forward to Reginald

Copeland, Lionel Curtis, W.K. Hancock, and their successors. The starting point of this study is a different one: not historiography in the abstract, but history-books: material objects bearing edited texts addressed to communities of readers. By drawing upon the theory and practice of book history (sometimes known as the history of authorship, publishing, and reading), we can sometimes isolate those untidy but also decisive moments when a book is no more than an idea – in this case, the idea of a history of Britain’s colonies. The idea for a book may germinate solely in the mind of its author but it might equally begin with an enterprising publisher or even be dimly imagined by its potential or future readers. More often it is a collaborative act of imagination among them all. Such moments are seldom recalled in print by the authoritative authorial voice of the historian but they can often be reconstructed from correspondence and business records in the archives of both historians and their publishers. As part of a larger project on the publishing history of history books in Britain from 1850 to 1950,¹ this study aims to contribute to two aspects of historical scholarship: book history and the development of history as a professional academic discipline.

The history-of-history scholarship has made very little use of the archives of publishers. An unwillingness to accord much significance to the agency of publishers in the shaping of historical works may be implicit in this neglect. The *Cambridge Modern History* (1902-1912; hereafter *CMH*) was the idea of the Syndics of the Press and not Lord Acton’s; and similarly Robert Longman proposed to G.M. Trevelyan the project of what became his extremely influential and profitable *English Social History* (1944; Clark; Althoz; Cannadine 169, 224). What do these examples suggest about the general practice? It may seem heretical to challenge the image of the individual historian-author patiently culling “his” materials from the “original authorities” and then moving to “his” writing table to sit down and compose “his” narrative, working as a solitary genius like a poet or critic. Using masculine pronouns only underlines the gendering of this image of autonomy (Smith; Krueger) and hints at its constructed nature. In a similar vein, historiography often speaks of a scholar “publishing” one of his or her books as if the intervention of the publishing firm were no more problematic than that of the proofreader. On the contrary: it was often decisive.

Research in their archives suggests that British publishers helped to broker the initial encounter between British historians and the imperial past and that publishers were acting on behalf of their customers – the reading public. To accord agency to publishers and readers is not to denigrate historian-authors who still dominate the triangle of relationships that make up the production and reception of a book. But recent scholarship in book history has demonstrated the power of readers and publishers along with many others in related areas such as editing, reviewing, journalism, teaching, and even fashionable gossip (Secord). Trends in historical scholarship responded, then as now, to events in the broader culture. Among historians, there was a time-lag during which ideas not only developed in relation to experience but also practical matters intervened. New scholars became qualified and got appointed, and established ones completed earlier works before undertaking new ones. Meanwhile, publishers and readers were experiencing the same imperial events and were clamoring for historical explanations.

In order to suggest some of the issues raised by this approach, this study comments on the publication of Sir John Seeley’s *Expansion of England* in 1883, and then discusses four case

studies relating to imperial history in English publishing houses through the period from the 1870s to 1916. This behind-the-scenes evidence illuminates many of the tensions inherent in the project of history, broadly defined, in the culture of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British world.

Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883)

Philip Buckner and others have argued that recent developments in imperial historiography from the perspective of the colonized "other" have led to neglect of the British World or the settler colonies of the empire. Similarly, Seeley's *The Expansion of England* pointed out to his scholar-contemporaries that their obsession with the narrative of England's liberty led them to overlook England's expansion.

The book was not conceived as a publication but as two courses of lectures delivered to Cambridge undergraduates in 1881-82. Both modes of presentation reflected Seeley's theoretical concept of Greater Britain by sharply dividing "the colonies" (settled by English people) from "the Indian Empire" (where the fact of British rule over indigenous people was particularly striking). The argument of both sections was about the nature of historical study at least as much as about Empire. In this work as elsewhere, Seeley was concerned first to argue that history is politics and politics history;² and second to insist that historical study must be rigorously scientific, interested in detecting the laws of causation and eschewing the details of biography, culture, or social trend. The argument about the expansion of England from the "old colonial system" of the eighteenth century was an argument about historiography.

Seeley believed that his predecessors and peers were so much enmeshed in a narrative of England's *liberty* that they lost track of the important events that began about the time the account of liberty began to tail off, namely the dispersion of English-speaking people all over the globe. This is the context for his much-quoted statement about absence of mind. Discussing "the simple obvious fact of the extension of the English name into other countries of the globe," he continued:

There is something very characteristic in the indifference which we show towards this mighty phenomenon of the diffusion of our race and the expansion of our state. We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind. While we were doing it, that is in the eighteenth century, we did not allow it to affect our imaginations or in any degree to change our ways of thinking. [Our historians] . . . do not perceive that in that century the history of England is not in England but in America and Asia. (12-13)

Far from arguing or celebrating the absence of mind, Seeley is making a radical proposal about historical narrative. His quip sounds remarkably like Salman Rushdie's: "The trouble with the English is that their history happened overseas, so they don't know what it means."³ Unlike that of English liberty, his own narrative allows "the interest of English history . . . to deepen steadily to the close" so that

since the future grows out of the past, the history of the past of England ought to give rise to a prophecy concerning her future. Yet our popular historians scarcely seem to think so. Did not Aristotle say that a drama ends, but an epic poem only leaves off? English history, as it is popularly related, not only has no distinct end, but leaves off in such a gradual manner, growing feebler and feebler, duller and duller, towards the close, so that one might suppose that England instead of steadily gaining in strength had been for a century or two dying of mere old age. Can this be right?" (8)

The Expansion of England, then, should be read in the light of studies of historiography of England (properly, Britain) rather than of empire. It is also useful to read this influential work in the context of the circumstances of its publication. As it emerged into best-seller status, what began as a comment on historical methodology was marketed and received as a manifesto of imperial expansion.

In August 1882, a few months after the Cambridge lectures were delivered, the leading London publisher Alexander Macmillan heard about them from a colleague and instructed his assistant to tell Seeley "that we should gladly and hopefully undertake such a book, and would greatly like to hear from him about it" (BL MSS Add 54789/29). The two men were already well acquainted, having Broad Church theology in common as well as a number of publishing projects. The manuscript Macmillan received included a specific example of the popular historian whose celebration of liberty meant that his book's interest diminished as the narrative approached contemporary times. The target of Seeley's criticism was John Richard Green, Macmillan's great friend, whose *Short History of the English People* (1874) had become a standard text and was still producing substantial profits for both author and publisher. Seeley acceded to Macmillan's request that the reference could be eliminated: "As a matter of course I should not wish to print the passage on Green as it stands, particularly as I hear sad accounts of his health, poor fellow!" He went on to emphasize the private and primarily historiographical qualities of the lecture scripts:

You must remember that the MS was put in your hands just as it was first written – and it was not written for publication. I do not blame Green for not knowing all history equally well, though I think he may be blamed for writing on the parts he knows less well. But, if I remember aright, the passage does not blame him at all, but only his book; it only says that a History of England in which the interest steadily diminishes towards the end instead of increasing is, so far, not a good history. However I have no desire whatever to attack him . . .

As for your sending the MS to the Printers' at once, the proposal makes me rather nervous. I have not yet positively made up my mind to publish it at all. Anyhow I think I should like to get some Indian authority to read over the later lectures. At what time would you like to

publish? How long will it take to publish, allowing a good deal of time for correction? (BL MSS Add 55074/24, 6 Sept 1882)

By suggestions such as omitting the reference to Green, Macmillan guided Seeley through the revision of lectures that had “originally [been] written in great distraction & without sufficient plan” (BL MSS Add 55074/58, 4 October [1882]).

Further encouragement came from Florence Nightingale who regarded the lectures as “so unspeakably important” and saw “a whole new vista for the education of Civil Service candidates opening out of them” (Wormell 94). Nightingale’s comment points to the dual questions of how the book was intended and how it was to be used. Although his book would not likely have been set for examinations at Cambridge, Seeley’s main purpose was presumably the indoctrination of future historians, not civil servants. Macmillan may have discerned a more popular readership but neither of them could determine how the book would be received by that amorphous collectivity — the Victorian reading public.

After three years of steady sales, Seeley and Macmillan began to discuss the publication of a stripped-down version of the book, omitting the whole section on India as well as “all the academic part, which deals with the method of historic study.” The author had been advised to do this by a number of readers including Lord Rosebery and also by the headmaster of Marlborough School who reported that “he had found the book [to] produce a very rousing effect upon his boys, added expressly that he had not ventured to try them with the Indian part” (Seeley to A. Macmillan, BL MSS Add 55074/47, 18 Feb [1887]). *Our Colonial Expansion, Extracts from the Expansion of England* appeared in 1887 in time for sale to visitors at the Colonial Exhibition. Further research among the print-runs, sales figures, and contemporary advertisements, as well as reviews, might well discover that the much-vaunted commercial and political impact should be attributed not to the book that historians are reading today but to this popular abridgement.⁴ James Secord’s research on the publication of a *Victorian Sensation* (2000) in the realm of science shows that evidence of reception may be recoverable for books that leave the right kind of cultural trace.

The Oxford University Press and C.P. Lucas/Hugh Egerton

Alexander Macmillan in London first got word of *The Expansion of England* and profited from its success. The Presses at Oxford and Cambridge were not publishing much history in the 1880s and even less were they interested in pursuing colonial history. The archives of the Clarendon Press of Oxford University indicate that they were moving very gingerly into the field of imperial, or colonial, history-book-publishing. Nevertheless, two of their authors, Charles Prestwood Lucas (1853-1931) and Hugh Egerton (1855-1927), are credited with significant early contributions (Louis 12-15).

Long before these authors’ works appeared, the Clarendon Press depended for advice on history books from two men, Macmillan himself and William Stubbs. From 1863 to 1880, Macmillan served as Publisher to the University under a formal partnership agreement. Meanwhile the Press began to feel its way towards the correct role to take in relation to such burgeoning academic departments as the History School. Macmillan’s agency as publisher of

“all books issued by the University from the Learned side of the Press” marks the period of transition to modern academic publishing (Sutcliffe 18, 24-6).

The Press Letter Books demonstrate that in addition to Macmillan’s commercial advice, the staff and Delegates also relied very heavily upon Stubbs. He was Regius Professor of History, the first practicing academic historian appointed to that post. In addition to producing his *Select Charters* (first published in 1860) in successive editions (Soffer 85-6), Stubbs could review (and usually reject) the historical manuscripts which were submitted. Only a few new histories appeared during the years of his influence. E.A. Freeman was at work on his *Norman Conquest* (6 volumes, 1867-79) and promised the Press a History of Greece; Augustus Ward was composing one of Germany. In 1871, the Press published a translation of Ranke which, despite its historiographical importance, was not commercially successful. Altogether, the OUP was very cautious about history until the late 1880s.

By 1886, Frederick York Powell (1850-1904), an Icelandic scholar, had taken over Stubbs’s role as the Delegate who advised the OUP on historical matters. He was told by a Press undersecretary in that year that “[t]he four histories on our list of desiderata are those of England, France, Greece and Rome” (C.E. Doble to F. York Powell, 18 May 1886, OUP Letter Books 40/16). No interest in the politically-sensitive question of empire is evident but only a few weeks later Powell was being consulted on Lucas’s projected edited work, *An Historical Geography of the Colonies*. The proposal was accepted with only minor revisions. Lucas was not an Oxford don: he was a Colonial Office civil servant; thus his books were reviewed as commentaries on contemporary politics and events, not as serious history. A decade later, Lord Acton, scouting for contributors to the *CMH*, was warned that Lucas might not be “enough of a historian for the chapter on Oceanic Empire” (W.A.J. Archbold to Acton, CUL MSS Add 6443/20, 15 Jan. 1897).

Lucas’s only direct contribution to the multi-volume project that he also edited was an 1887 introductory volume. By the turn of the century, his work was being taken over by Egerton, a name much better known in imperial historiography. Egerton too began in the Colonial Office but moved in 1905 to Oxford as the first Beit Professor of Colonial History. Louis regards Egerton as “the pioneer in the field after Seeley” with his 1897 *Short History of British Colonial Policy* (Louis 12; Burroughs 198). In 1903, the OUP was preoccupied with Egerton’s revision of Lucas’s sixteen-year-old book: should it be under the original author’s name or might Egerton rather write a whole new book to replace the previous work at that point in the series? Lucas, now on the rise within the civil service, insisted that the edition be published in Egerton’s name alone, the reason being “is that the book will suffer if I am associated with it as it will be much more colourless. I am in a more responsible position than when I wrote my first little book and cannot discuss freely in print current colonial topics. It would therefore be best & very much to my mind that the whole responsibility for what is really an entirely new book should be Egerton’s.” In any case, Lucas added generously that “his name will now carry at least as much credit as mine in connexion with colonial subjects” (Lucas to OUP, 12 May 1903, OUP Archives LB 1720).

Although with the *Historical Geography* and *Short History*, the OUP did sponsor some of the founding texts of the history of the British world, the surviving correspondence about the projects indicates that they did so in a fit of absence of mind, as it were, not because of an

institutional policy that imperial history was important. Cambridge took a similar view. Both University Presses, however, had to be careful not to take sides in what still seemed more a matter of contemporary politics than of academic scholarship.

The Cambridge University Press and the *Cambridge Modern History*

The *CMH* was published between 1902 and 1912: twelve large volumes, taking up the story of a “modern world” at the Renaissance and carrying it through to its readers’ present day. With such a periodization, the book’s publishers and editors could hardly avoid the historiographical problems of empire but they had difficulty in finding qualified and trustworthy contributors whose historical knowledge or expertise lay in colonial fields.

The *CMH* was planned by Lord Acton at the invitation of the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press. Similar to the Oxford Delegates, the Syndics were cautiously entering the world of scholarly publishing in the 1890s. They had left such work to London firms like Macmillan for the most part, concentrating instead on printing Bibles and the classics. Now that the University and its Press had made themselves responsible for contributing to scholarship in the discipline of history, an ambitious and substantial project was contemplated. When Lord Acton was appointed in 1895 to succeed Seeley as Regius Professor of Modern History, the Syndics asked him to be General Editor. He wrote virtually nothing, at least for publication, but he read a great deal and lectured inspiringly about history as well as about liberty. Acton’s was a big, charismatic personality, and the Press perhaps hoped to take advantage of that to publish a big, consequential work of historical scholarship under his direction. In any case, Lord Acton agreed readily, plunging almost immediately into the drafting of chapter headings and lists of contributors. Although he contributed not a word of prose, Acton did develop the structure of the work, and its premise and organization remain influential. When he died in 1902 just as the first volumes were appearing, the *CMH* was carried on by his successors.

The narrative that Seeley had found so unsatisfactory was Lord Acton’s story. Beginning with the Reformation and Scientific Revolution, it carried on through the contrast between absolutism in France and constitutional government in England, to the French Revolution and Napoleon, and on to liberalism, industrialism, and urbanization, ending with a curiously unsatisfactory coda of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Chadwick 214-5). The words (and sentence, paragraphs, and chapters) of this story were extracted with varying degrees of success from his team of contributors. The process not only established several of the latter contributors in their careers, made the Press a tidy profit, and possibly killed Acton himself through overwork. It also set the pattern, however, for a whole series of multi-volume Cambridge Histories. The Press had first wanted a History of the World and it was Acton who insisted on lopping off the Ancient and Medieval periods and leaving a thick (and now much-contested) scar through the premodern centuries. Later on, both the Ancient and Medieval periods were accorded Cambridge Histories of their own as were the British Empire and several other historiographical constructs. All this is well known (Clark, Althoz, Chadwick) but historiographical scholarship has not accounted for the agency of the Press in the conception and formation of the *CMH*.

Studies of the *CMH* have depended too much on uncritical readings of a marketing

publication that appeared in 1907 (Wright) and not enough on the archival record. The letters of W.A.J. Archbold to Acton (CUL MSS Add 6443) give an unparalleled view of the negotiations with contributors. Although both Chadwick and Althoz cite this correspondence, their accounts pay insufficient attention to the commercial side of the project. The Syndics provided Acton with a full-time assistant in the person of William Archbold (1865-1947), a young historian who was not only well-qualified (he could stand up to the master when necessary, albeit in a very respectful way) but he was also well-connected. "I want to write to you about men," he would say, and go on to tell Acton where his ideas about a potential contributor were ill-founded and who might do what: "There are plenty of clever men, but I don't like merely to write down the name of a man who would read up the subject if asked to, or at all events not too many of such" (CUL MSS Add 6443/13, 21 December 1896). When it came to colonial subjects, however, little was available to "read up." The familiar clique of clever men lacked the necessary specialist knowledge and other contributors had to be recruited.

The plan of the Modern History was a complex one but there was room in it for Greater Britain. Acton mistrusted Froude — the literary amateur — to handle Oceania. He soon discovered, however, that few practising academics made the colonies their subject although many working journalists did so, and a number of retired colonial servants had been tempted to write about their experiences. Quite early in the process, someone recommended that Acton seek assistance on colonial matters from a "Miss Shaw" and he dispatched Archbold to track her down. He reported on 29 December 1896: "Miss Shaw. I find no information as to her as yet. It has struck me that your informant may have misled you & may mean G.B. Shaw (a well known Fabian) who is a man." This amusing misconstruction drew Owen Chadwick's attention and he noted that "she turned out to be a Miss Nora Shaw who cared about colonial history" (242). *Flora* Shaw was actually a senior journalist — *The Times'* chief correspondent on colonial affairs.⁵

The fact that Shaw's knowledge of the colonies came from journalism, not historical scholarship, seems to have mattered little to either of them, but Archbold was troubled by her gender. Acton was quite persistent and Archbold equally resistant. "Are you quite sure," he asked Acton again, "about [inviting] Miss Shaw? I mean in comparison with others. Lucas, Thwaites, Doyle." Lucas, as we have seen, was a senior civil servant with a bent for historical geography. Reuben Gold Thwaites's disadvantage was his American citizenship and location: he was librarian of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Only John Andrew Doyle approximated the Actonian ideal; he was a historical scholar of independent means, a fellow of All Souls who divided his time between Oxford and a country estate. "Perhaps," Archbold concluded with some desperation, "you will let me write to you again about Colonial Authorities. And outside of them, that is to say outside of the ordinary writers, may there not be some retired officials who are possible?" (CUL MSS Add 6443/20, 15 January 1897).

Acton must have persisted, because Archbold's next remark is more forceful. "As to Miss Shaw. My suggestion only amounts to this. I do not know anything about her. You say that she is a Fabian which is rather against a writer in this particular field. It is very much like Italy or at all events somewhat, though on quite different grounds." Archbold meant that the Actonian goal of objectivity would be compromised. "I am trying, to put it bluntly, to think what kind of chapter her brother would write. This is one thing. There remains the possibility of

other men writing.” He suggested the names he had raised before and added former colonial governor Sir George Grey, as well as “W.P. Grescock” who seemed “to have taken trouble with his history of the Dominion of Canada in questions as to its government” (CUL MSS Add 6443/22, 19 January 1897). He meant William Henry Parr Greswell (1848-1923), a literary clergyman whose history of Canada had been published by the OUP in 1890.

Apart from the casual sexism so typical of this period, this case demonstrates that the men who made the History had great difficulty in recruiting contributors to write about colonial matters. Thirty-three years later, an eight-volume *Cambridge History of the British Empire* would, again, be written collaboratively (Benians *et al*). Now, in 1896-7, on the eve of the Second Boer War and at the height of jingoism, Europe’s colonial expansion did not feature on the historiographical agenda. Of the five male names mentioned by Archbold as alternatives to Flora Shaw, only Doyle was a historical scholar in the Seeley-Acton mode. As we have seen, the others were people with direct personal experience in a colonial setting.

The narratives of France and Italy, or humanism and Protestantism, were not assigned to people who had been “out there” but to scholars whose interpretation of documents was disciplined by the constraints of contemporary historical practice. The narrative of colonial expansion and the transmission of European culture to new worlds was deemed to be integral to a comprehensive modern history, but the sources and methods were disturbingly different and the writers wrote in a different narrative vein. Sir George Grey had just returned from service as governor of New Zealand where he had developed an antiquarian interest in the history of the Antipodes. Archbold wondered if Lucas was “enough of a historian” for the same demanding chapter whose test had already been failed by Froude. Working in Acton’s shadow, he distinguished between “men” like Flora Shaw who would be able to do less “professional” chapters — such as “the history of Colonisation & discovery & kindred topics” on the one hand — and the ones who could be called upon for “pure history so to speak,” on the other (CUL MSS Add 6443/23, 22 January 1897).

From the 1870s to the First World War, the experience of Macmillan’s, Cambridge, and Oxford University Presses with books on the subject of empire may be characterized as cautious interest tempered by the lack of suitable manuscripts. Further examples could be drawn from the archives of other publishers such as George Allen who floated a British Empire Series in 1909-10 or from the experience of other historians such as G.W. Prothero, the student of German history who edited an important (but unprofitable) Cambridge Historical Series for the University Press from 1893 until his death in 1922 (UA Pr.A.P.696: 108, 22 March 1922). Most of the established academic historians at Oxford, Cambridge, and the newer universities shied away from the political aspect of writing about a Greater Britain and so did their University Presses. (Seeley was the exception, but as we have seen his interest was historiographical as much as it was imperial.) Some people, such as Froude and Goldwin Smith, were not regarded as peers by men in the Oxbridge historical establishment despite their public influence and extensive popularity. At the same time, there was tremendous political engagement with the question of Empire; here the interest was not primarily historical and not at all scholarly.

Publishers dealt with the situation in various ways. One response was to set people with colonial experience as administrators to work, writing about the places they had governed. Because they were located in divergent parts of the historiographical acreage of Bourdieu’s

literary field, within the purview of this study, speculating on why some titles failed altogether would not be productive. Others, however, like Seeley's *Expansion of England*, succeeded and still others like those of C.P. Lucas simply appeared without fanfare (MacDonald 1-21). No doubt literary talent was a factor, but so was the business expertise of the various publishers. The publishers made the marketing decisions which fine-tuned the introduction of specific books into the general climate of popular interest and political debate. None of this prepared the metropolitan historians and their publishers for a very different writerly response to empire: manuscripts from people who had lived in colonial settings and made their living as writers in journalism while nurturing an amateur interest in the history of the place they had adopted.

Australia's History Evaluated in Macmillan Readers' Reports

Turn-of-the-century publishers not only sought out books on particular subjects or courted individual celebrities, they also received unsolicited manuscripts from aspiring writers. Books in both classes were sent out for review – sometimes to acknowledged experts in the field in a system that has become familiar as peer review – but more often to people on the staff of the firm whose task was to read and review manuscripts. Linda Marie Fritschner, Gail Chester, and others have written about the influence of publishers' readers on literary publishing. In the case of history, too, these reports can be very revealing. They demonstrated contemporary values not only in terms of gender, race, and nationality but also concerning such issues as the newly austere professional standards of historical research, writing, and argumentation.

Mowbray Morris was principal Reader for Macmillan's from 1891 to 1911. An old-fashioned man of letters with an interest in history but with no scholarly credentials, Morris was both partial and prejudiced (Bolitho). His Reports on works of history, preserved with others in the Macmillan archive in the British Library, are striking for their disparagement of places like Australia and (to a lesser extent) Canada. In line with many of his contemporaries, Morris seems to have believed that the colonies did not really *have* a history, at least not in the conventional sense of the word. His scathing opinion of the British settlers is only exceeded by his views on the aboriginal peoples. Macmillan's firm had been criticized for listening too much to Mowbray Morris and other conservative readers assessing the manuscripts of novels. Famously, they turned down early works by Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, and George Bernard Shaw, and the firm's resistance to literary modernism is well documented (Morgan, Millgate, Gould). A similar case can be made for four or five Readers' Reports on works of colonial history, of which one will serve as an extended example. Frank Donohue (c1861-1908) was an Australian journalist who edited various country newspapers before moving to Sydney. In 1895, he submitted a manuscript to Macmillan entitled "The Story of the Old Austral Sea-Rovers." It was not published; Morris's report had found no literary, scholarly, or historical value:

This is one of those patriotic attempts to give Australia an ancient history, which the Colonists seem to have borrowed from America, and of which several, you may remember, have come into our hands within the last two years. Mr Donohue, however, is so far reasonable as to recognise that the country is as yet far too young to have any history in the true sense of

the word, and has therefore preferred to tell the story of the voyages in the South Seas which resulted in its discovery. But here his reasonableness ends. It is certain that the Dutch touched various parts of the Australian coasts in the first half of the seventeenth century, though, until Tasman's two voyages, they seem to have had no idea of the true significance of what they had found. But the real history of Australian discovery centres round two men, Dampier & Cook; and to these two Mr Donohue devotes just 100 out of his 529 pages . . . There might be room for such a book as Mr Donohue has tried to write (though I do not believe Australia to be much of a name to conjure with), and these tentative voyages would of course take a place in it. But to write it on such a plan is absurd . . . As for Mr D's literary qualities, they are those of the newspaper press, which is his profession. His vocabulary is heartbreaking, his verbosity and irrelevancy are wearisome; but he has a sort of slovenly picturesqueness of style which often serves him well in his descriptions, and he has the reporter's eye for a scene. He is a bad writer, but not always a dull one. (BL MSS Add 55953/32, 22 January 1895)

Other reports sound the same theme: Australia was denigrated as "a country with barely a hundred years of story, of which less than one half can be said to have come into history." The collaborative authors of another Report used American spelling and "other sundry disagreeable tricks from the same workshop . . . nobody in England would read a dozen pages of it for his own pleasure." One author was faulted because her subject, not her writing, was the problem: "The country is dull, the original inhabitants were dull, hardly indeed ranking with human beings" (BL MSS Add 55945/119, 22 January 1892; 55958/230, 15 December 1898; 55971/126, 27 December 1908).

Similar to Thomas Hardy, Frank Donohue and other writers took an innovative approach — Hardy to fiction and they to the past. These writers believed that Australia had a history that needed only to be researched, written, and put into circulation. They were treated very differently, however, than John Richard Green whose parochial view of England's history had been enormously successful commercially and moderately well-received by scholars. Perhaps the colonial historians' talent and training did not equal Green's. Certainly they lacked his entrée into the insular world of British letters. Morris found certain elements of the colonial prose somewhat repugnant, but his judgment was also shaped by an ingrained and unexamined sense of the boundaries of the historical genre. Rather than methodological innovativeness, he saw chaos and irrelevance. The colonial narratives and prose violated his and Macmillan's deeply-felt sense of history. Like the explicitly modern novels and poetry of Hardy, Shaw, and Yeats, these new histories de-centered the imperial metropolis and focused on previously unconsidered peoples and events, perhaps on a British world. As with those literary writers, the agency of publishers exercised through their own agents in the persons of Readers such as Morris powerfully (and negatively) affected the framing of historical knowledge in their culture.

Conclusion

The 1880s and 1890s were historiographically very exciting decades at Oxford and Cambridge. Seeley, Stubbs, and Acton were unchallenged. Under their tutelage, medieval and early modern documents were uplifted from the archives, meticulously edited, and printed to enable a somewhat wider circulation and cautious analysis. Even in the universities, publishers perceived a market for a different sort of history book that might serve not only as a scholar's platform but also a student's guide, a reader's entertainment, and a patriot's inspiration. The four decades before the First World War were a moment of tension between two interests as the aspirations of academic historians came into conflict with the demands of their reading public. These conflicting motivations were mediated by publishers, and colonial history was arguably the most fraught issue. Not that the unity of either group was clear-cut; a debate raged among historians about both philosophy and method. Publishers' practices were equally distinctive.

Nevertheless, an approach that later practitioners of the discipline would make commonplace was, at this time, virtually inconceivable. To write the history of a place before European contact was virtually unknown, not to mention undocumented. This seemed impracticable and in any case devoid of obvious interest. Events since that decisive occurrence were too few, too brief, and too narrowly localized to interest the metropolitan scholar. Publishers meanwhile endeavoured to call forth an unwritten narrative that would serve their commercial and cultural ends but their imagination was limited to Britons with colonial experience or to colonials with university training. Seeley identified a British world where Britons were born and died in colonial settings but historical writing emanating from that world remained suspect.

Notes

1. For further information see Howsam, 2004, and the project website, [historybooks: www.uwindsor.ca/historybooks](http://www.uwindsor.ca/historybooks). The research was made possible by a grant in 1999 from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and was also supported by the Falconer Madan Award from the Bibliographical Society (London) and the University of Windsor. For alternative perspectives on book history and empire, see recent work by Darnton, Eggert, and Joshi.
2. It was Edward Augustus Freeman, not Seeley, who said "History is past politics, and politics present history." Seeley's less elegant formulation was that "history liberalises politics, while reference to politics raises history above 'mere literature'" (Wormell 44, 121).
3. Quoted from *The Satanic Verses* by Bhabha. See also Burton. Seeley, like Burton, was at pains to convince his contemporaries that (in her words) "empire was not a phenomenon 'out there,'" but rather inherent in conceptualizing the history of Britain (486).
4. Various commentators including Thornton (51) and Wormell (155) have noted sales figures but a systematic study of Macmillan's records remains to be undertaken.
5. Flora Louise Shaw (1852-1929; married Sir Frederick Lugard 1902). She was widely known to be the head of the colonial department of *The Times*. Her name was especially prominent in 1896 because she had just made an error in journalistic judgement about the Jameson raid by accepting a phoney letter as

authentic. As a result, she was required to give evidence at an enquiry in May 1897.

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