

## The Obvious and the Awkward:

### POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE BRITISH WORLD



IN 2003 PETER GIBBONS suggested that it was ‘perhaps time for New Zealand historians to become less parochial and insular and to decentre or even dissolve “New Zealand” as a subject’. If historians were to ‘decentre ... “New Zealand” as a subject’, he asked, ‘what other explicatory frameworks might they deploy?’<sup>1</sup> This article takes up Gibbons’s challenge and considers two alternative ‘explicatory frameworks’: British World scholarship and postcolonial methodology. The focus is on the relationship between the recent surge of interest in the history of the British world and postcolonial approaches to the past. How are these two broad fields of scholarship relevant to enquiries that concern and include Aotearoa/New Zealand? Four key themes are canvassed: the connections and differences between ‘British World’ history and postcolonial history; the limitations of reasserting a ‘new’ British world; the implications for writing beyond national boundaries; and the attempt to bridge the divide between British imperial history written largely from the metropolis and the nation-centred histories of the former British Dominions.

From the perspective of early twenty-first-century Aotearoa/New Zealand, the similarities between postcolonial approaches and British World approaches are obvious and pervasive; yet there are some awkward and unsettling differences. The greatest discomfort — and therefore the most vibrant area for future scholarship — is in the disjunction between the transnational and the nation-based modes of enquiry. While de-centring the nation can be helpful in broadening and deepening historical knowledge, this article demonstrates that dissolving ‘New Zealand’ as a subject poses a risk. There is much to be lost in abandoning the nation.

In the final decades of the twentieth century a critical, postcolonial approach to studying the past offered a significant, and cutting-edge, mode of enquiry both within the discipline of history and across the social sciences and humanities. Often connected to countercultural leftist politics that viewed the past as inherently political, the process of critically interrogating colonialism drew upon a plethora of interdisciplinary influences, including post-Marxism, literary studies and feminism. The postcolonial approach to the past largely defined itself in opposition to traditional imperial history, critiquing imperial history for its promotion of empire, its marginalization of indigenous peoples and its ‘top-down’ approach to history that ignored resistance to hegemonic practices. Using established categories of analysis — gender, race and class — social and cultural historians focused on recovering colonial history hidden in previous grand narratives.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century a form of ‘new imperial history’ often termed ‘British World history’ gained strength. This approach offered the potential for historians interested in both postcolonialism and imperial history to develop new approaches that questioned the core/periphery relationship, that

moved beyond the nation to the transnational and that included Britishness in examinations of the past.

Reminiscent of a latter-day pilgrimage around an empire on which the sun had long set, a series of British World conferences was held in parts of the former British Empire from 1998 to 2007. Conference organizers, however, believed that ‘It should not be necessary to point out that the purpose of resurrecting the concept of a British World is not an exercise in imperial nostalgia, a lament for a world we have lost. Scholars who study Britishness and believe in its historical significance do not necessarily identify with it or approve of imperialism in any form. Our goal is to re-examine a complex phenomenon and to understand how it shaped the world in which we now live.’<sup>2</sup> The first and smallest conference was held at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London in June 1998. It was followed by larger meetings in Cape Town (2002), Calgary (2003), Melbourne (2004), Auckland (2005) and Bristol (2007). The conferences formed the centre of a British World approach, and they captured a collection of international scholars. They have resulted in a number of edited volumes, as well as the use of the term ‘British World history’ in scholarship by those who had previously described their fields as commonwealth or imperial history, or sometimes international, global or comparative history.

The British World approach to history was prophetically summarized in J.G.A. Pocock’s 1973 John Beaglehole Public Lecture at the New Zealand Historical Association conference in Christchurch. Acknowledging the connection, proponents of a British World approach trace back to the moment of articulation in Christchurch.<sup>3</sup> Pocock argued that Britain ‘the central giant has cooled, shrunk and moved away’ from its former empire. He advocated ‘post-Commonwealth and extra-European’ history that sought ‘new and interesting ways of defining its tangential identity by remapping the various systems within which it moves’.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of Britain joining the European Economic Community on 1 January 1973 — a stark postcolonial moment for New Zealand — Pocock captured the end of empire, and the lack of allegiance between former colonies. He warned against highly nationalistic historiographies taking the place of imperial history, and he gestured towards transnational histories.

Twenty-five years later, aware of Pocock’s sentiments, Phillip Buckner organized the first British World conference in London.<sup>5</sup> One of a number of scholars who argue that Canada developed its historiography in a cultural nationalist tradition that downplayed previously dominant British imperial influences, Buckner hoped for the return of pro-Commonwealth history rather than a fostering of a post-Commonwealth history. Buckner’s first task was reasserting the British imperial past in the historiography of Canada.<sup>6</sup> As he has written, ‘Canadian history cannot be understood without recognition of the fact that Canada was for several centuries part of a “Greater Britain” that extended around the globe’.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Buckner has focused on encouraging imperial history written from the United Kingdom to pay more attention to the complex histories of the former colonies. Mindful of Pocock’s plea for a ‘new British history’, Buckner’s British World project also implied an eventual move beyond nationalist histories to a search for transnational comparisons with other parts of the British world. To this end he worked hard to bring together scholars who viewed history through an imperial lens. Buckner

sought to bridge the divide between British imperial history, largely written from the metropolis, and the nation-centred histories of the former British Dominions (Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa).<sup>8</sup> Along with Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, he edited a collection of papers from the Cape Town conference.<sup>9</sup> Two edited collections emerged from the Calgary conference, and a further two from the Australian conference.<sup>10</sup> A forthcoming edited collection from the Bristol conference has the focus of ‘empire, identity and migration’.<sup>11</sup> The essays in these collections span a wide range of topics, reflecting the heterogeneity of the conference papers, but as in ‘new’ imperial history more generally, the migration of British peoples and economic and cultural institutions around the Dominions, and the subsequent settlements established, arguably make up the main area of work. Because ‘Britishness’ was promoted most overtly during times of conflict, military history and studies of war and society are also of interest to many British World scholars.

The British World conferences can be credited with fostering a new and enthusiastic engagement between those studying Britishness and scholars interested in British settler societies. In 2001, echoing Pocock’s 1973 words, James Belich wrote of the ‘neo Britains’ that ‘[i]n a strange way ... each saw themselves as the Lone Aspostle of Better Britonism, while gazing steadily past each other’.<sup>12</sup> A decade later the historiography is connecting and networking the British world as never before. And notwithstanding some important points of difference, there is plenty of common ground between postcolonial and British World scholarship that the next section examines in detail.

First, postcolonial and British World scholarship share the same space. The focus of the British World conferences on Britain and its white Dominions has made for a direct connection with postcolonial history. Significantly, unlike the labels of ‘commonwealth history’ and ‘imperial history’, ‘British World history’ simply reasserts its geographical domain as ‘British’, but at the expense of complicating the way we see the past. The spotlight is on British settlers and their colonial legacy. In contrast, while sharing the geographical location, postcolonial scholars are centrally concerned to reposition settlers as colonizers, and to view their dealings with indigenous peoples as part of the imperial project of domination.<sup>13</sup> From the perspective of Aotearoa/New Zealand, understandings of postcolonialism are deeply embedded in the ongoing legacy of the construction of a ‘settler society’. The so-called ‘white settler societies’ of the British Empire are part of what postcolonial scholar Stephen Slemon has termed the ‘second world’.<sup>14</sup> These are places where colonizers and the colonized share a specific history; places where settlers from Britain constructed dominance through the economic, political and cultural ways of a ‘superior’ British imperial centre. While other parts of the British Empire built national identity out of the rejection of a ‘deficit model’ (i.e. the rejection of a definition of colonial inferiority to Britain), in the settler societies colonial worth was proved by the emulation and imposition of imperial standards. This involved ‘mimicking’ the ‘mother country’. Understanding mimicry has been an important theme of postcolonial scholarship.<sup>15</sup> It also affords detailed attention to race and whiteness, the examination of which has recently been enthusiastically pursued by Australian-based scholars.<sup>16</sup> Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds offer a sweeping critical perspective on whiteness and empire.<sup>17</sup> In Aotearoa/New Zealand

Maori aspirations for political and cultural sovereignty have led to a more radical focus. While there is much of merit in postcolonial and new imperial indigenous history, it is important that local, detailed and necessarily awkward nation-based histories are critically developed.

Along with the same space, British World scholarship and postcolonial approaches to history also share a focus on 'Britishness'. From Australia, Darian-Smith, Grimshaw and Macintyre observed that the 'various and transformative forms of Britishness' were central to the discussion of the British World rubric.<sup>18</sup> Uncovering and analysing Britishness was a natural progression for imperial historians who wanted to examine the past as a British place. Buckner's work on royal tours provides an example.<sup>19</sup> Demonstrating the conjunction between British World and postcolonial approaches, Jock Phillips's deconstruction of Queen Elizabeth II's 1953–54 tour of New Zealand overlaps with Buckner's British World approach.<sup>20</sup> Phillips's influential work is a good example of how the recent historiography of Aotearoa/New Zealand has quietly, yet 'obviously', involved an inherent understanding of colonialism. For example, addressing the construction of Britishness and imperial/colonial identities is an underlying theme in Phillips's work on masculinity.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, a concern with understanding how Britishness was formed meant that the British World conferences attracted a cluster of scholars for whom the field was already obvious. Coming from a 'new socio-cultural approach', John MacKenzie's pioneering and prolific work had advanced 'new imperial history'. The successful Manchester University Press *Studies in Imperialism* series, of which he is the general editor, forms the centre of a 'school' of new imperial history that has much in common with a British World approach. *Studies in Imperialism* draws upon a range of disciplinary approaches encompassing popular culture, media studies, art history, the study of education and religion, sports history and children's literature. The broad cultural brief includes studies of migration and race, as well as political and constitutional, economic and military history. This focus at once captures the current intentions of British World scholarship, and pushes British World boundaries through its engagement with social and cultural as well as constitutional and political history, and its outreach to the United States.<sup>22</sup> The more than 50 books in the series cover a wide variety of parts of the empire, topics and time periods. The focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the same as the British World focus. These books, however, range more broadly than the specifically British World approach. The longstanding presence of the series highlights that for a cluster of scholars the British World concept was a tried (perhaps even tired) and obvious historical framework. The allure of the British World has been strongest for those fundamentally caught up in nation-based approaches to history.

A third area of common ground for postcolonial and British World scholarship rests in their shared intention to challenge and disrupt the core/periphery divide. While traditional imperial scholarship has an 'empire-wide' focus hardwired into its approach, questioning imperial hierarchies is at the centre of postcolonial history.<sup>23</sup> It is a long time since John MacKenzie questioned the core/periphery divide, drawing attention to the importance of the empire in forming British popular identity.<sup>24</sup> More recently, and influenced by the work of postcolonial

scholars such as Edward Said, historians have examined relations between colony and metropole as ‘mutually constitutive’, albeit in non-settler societies with the colonizer exercising authority over the colonized.<sup>25</sup>

Questions about the phenomenon of ‘cultural cringe’ constitute a fourth important area of common enquiry, though the extent and success of the challenge differs between the two approaches. Postcolonial history offers a more direct move beyond the legacy of presumed colonial inferiority, while despite well-developed national historiographies, the histories of the ‘neo Britains’ still suffer from a dose of cultural cringe.<sup>26</sup> This emanates from the legacy of imperial feeling that settler colonies did not have their ‘own’ histories; or if they did, these were assumed to be inferior to national histories of empire. Hence they are widely regarded as ‘easy’, ‘common knowledge’ and ‘boring’.<sup>27</sup> This is not an entirely new challenge. In 1950, A.A. Phillips published an essay titled ‘The Cultural Cringe’ and coined a term that has taken on multiple meanings which now extend beyond the confines of its direct applicability to Australian literature.<sup>28</sup> Phillips’s essay dissecting an ingrained inferiority complex became a foundation piece for postcolonial scholarship around the British world. He argued that the cringe appeared in ‘a tendency to make needless comparisons’, with the Australian reader asking, ‘Yes, but what would a cultivated Englishman think of this?’<sup>29</sup> The cringe thus combined a dose of insecurity with a measure of parochialism that still strikes a chord in examinations of the British world. As I have argued elsewhere, ‘Nation-based mindsets and inferiority complexes are alive and well in the historical professions of Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Specifically, there is the perpetuation of a “cultural cringe”, including the “cringe inverted” — involving the parochial construction of insiders and outsiders — that needs to be addressed if transnational history is to be pursued.’<sup>30</sup>

If the British World conferences were intended as a way of moving beyond cringe and towards transnational history, the cringe was nonetheless manifest at the meetings. Contributions to the conferences fell into three major categories. First, there were studies based upon research about the nation hosting the conference. Such papers were indistinguishable from those presented at national meetings such as the New Zealand Historical Association or the Australian Historical Association conferences, and they represented the continuation of nation-based approaches, replete with cringe-inducing attitudes. The second group was composed of contributions influenced by social and cultural history that identified with transnational themes in the historiography in the countries of the British world, such as immigration, indigenous history, memory and public history, media history and women’s history. Empirical research for individual papers on these themes was also often nationally focused, but by combining papers thematically sessions achieved geographical spread. A third group of presentations actively pursued the study of the idea of a British world. This involved scholars having a general historical knowledge beyond national boundaries, usually focusing on networks of people and information. They were often authors from the *Studies in Imperialism* series, or those publishing in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*.<sup>31</sup> Treating subjects as diverse as undersea cables and academic women, this group of papers sought sameness and connections.<sup>32</sup>

Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, it is the British-based, or British-educated, imperial historians who dominate in this third group: the divide between metropolis and ‘colony’ may thus be reinforced, rather than bridged. The cringe therefore remains with ‘colonials’, those scholars in the nations of the settler societies, feeling that they and their scholarship are separated from (and perhaps even superior to) that of the ‘mother country’. For example, in their introduction to *Britishness Abroad*, Darian-Smith, Grimshaw and Macintyre suggest that ‘the Dominion experience finds a minor place at best in the imperial history that is undertaken at Oxford, Cambridge, London and other universities in the British Isles’.<sup>33</sup> Darian-Smith, Grimshaw and Macintyre have a postcolonial vision for British World scholarship that moves beyond past networks of scholars that were drawn along imperial lines, infiltrates imperial old boys’ networks, and emphasizes transnationalism, postcolonialism and indigeneity. Darian-Smith, Grimshaw and Macintyre argue that the British world is not unitary: ‘[N]o longer an object of loyalty with familiar features and common points of reference it is something [scholars] discover in their own settings’.<sup>34</sup>

A mutual interest in questioning national boundaries constitutes a fifth area of common ground for postcolonial and British World approaches to history. Postcolonial perspectives have been used to critique colonialism’s complicity in nation-building approaches to history. As postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft stated, ‘Imperial/empirical history is a story of development towards an imperial end’.<sup>35</sup> Echoing this sentiment, introducing *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Giselle Byrnes wrote — after Gibbons’s suggestion — that ‘In other words, “national identity” is, we suggest, a euphemism for continuing colonisation’.<sup>36</sup> The main argument of this new national history is ‘that our understandings of New Zealand history are now far more complex and more fragmented than the “colony-to-nation” narrative admits’.<sup>37</sup>

The questioning of cores and peripheries, and moving beyond national boundaries to research and write transnational histories, is a broadly conceived common concern for postcolonial and British World approaches. There are, however, also some important differences. It is vital to remember that postcolonial scholarship arose in reaction to imperial history, offering a critique of imperial power and colonial process. Postcolonialism, then, has the ongoing broad brief of interrogating imperialism and colonialism.

Importantly, postcolonial approaches have been directly influenced by an interdisciplinary textual turn, and they have questioned the ‘narrative approach’ of imperial history. This work is influenced by literary studies, feminism and post-Marxism. If imperial history was about grand narratives, then critical narratives have been immensely important in postcolonial studies. For example, in his essay in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Gibbons was influenced by literary studies, broadening what counted as an ‘historical text’ by reading the past through ‘non-fiction’.<sup>38</sup> While the broaching of disciplinary boundaries is essential to a postcolonial approach, there has been suspicion of ‘the studies’, literary and postcolonial, from within the historical discipline/profession. The majority of scholarship associated with the British World approach can more easily be seen as contributing to the recovering and crafting of empirical facts into a ‘new imperial history’ than to a textual postcolonial history. Indeed, included

under the British World umbrella are those with ideological differences that separate out between imperial and postcolonial leanings. This separation can be read as a tension between the 'obvious' emphasis of 'new' imperial history written largely from the metropolis, and the 'awkward' critique of the colonial past written from insecure 'peripheries'. Darian-Smith, Grimshaw and Macintyre wrote that, 'Working alongside the imperial historians, though their presence is grudgingly accepted, are the exponents of postcolonialism. Following Edward Said, their investigations employ discourse analysis to show how the European experience of empire generated characteristic ways of seeing and working on the colonial subject.'<sup>39</sup> There is too, a middle ground. Those taking an approach similar to John MacKenzie's *Studies in Imperialism* bridge the divide by broadly incorporating postcolonialism into a recast, but nonetheless empirical, 'new' imperial history.

In general, the key interventions of postcolonialism — in theory at least — go further than British World boundaries. Scholars working in that field have experienced a sense of the 'loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the centre of the World'.<sup>40</sup> Nations themselves are narrations.<sup>41</sup> They are presented as contestable, imagined, invented traditions, steeped in ever-changing memory.<sup>42</sup>

Homi Bhabha has written of the need to 'think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences', of 'in-between' spaces and interstices of difference where 'the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated'.<sup>43</sup> This has led to a focus on encounter and contact zones, on interrogating cores and peripheries rather than reasserting them.<sup>44</sup> Even former colonizing centres of empire can become 'postcolonial', sharing the term with the regions that struggled to become independent from their power. In the contemporary city, as geographer Jane Jacobs has argued, 'the politics of the edge' is about the 'unstable negotiation of identity and power'.<sup>45</sup> Postcolonial European cities are now detached from their pasts, being studied for 'unmistakable signs of their imperial past, not only in their architecture and monuments, but also in the ways in which they are imagined by their inhabitants and visitors'.<sup>46</sup> Historians of women and imperialism have been cognizant of the two-way relationship between metropolis and colony, exploring the presence of Indian and Australian women in the imperial centre of London.<sup>47</sup>

A major difference between British World and postcolonial approaches is that while the British World focus is confident and assumed, with postcolonial approaches there is a clear awkwardness in arguing for the importance of a British past that is today offensive to some, and irrelevant to others. It is important to acknowledge that for postcolonial scholars who critique the imperial past, focusing on a British world raises issues currently considered uncomfortable and unfashionable, potentially re-opening old wounds and inflicting fresh ones. For example, part of the unpopularity of 'imperial history' in an age of growing attention to recovering a diverse and dispersed past is that revealing a British past is assumed to be the same as reasserting it in the present, in the process denying indigenous and multicultural voices. This perspective is particularly salient for Maori scholarship in Aotearoa/New Zealand. At a time when themes of transgression and hybridity are popular in history-writing, reintroducing a once-

dominant discourse is a potential minefield for critique. And a nation-based, rather than imperial, lens is needed to recover and interpret the details of the Maori past if understanding is to go beyond rhetoric to reach finely grained, awkward historical material that holds the most significant potential to understand the past.

Arguably, historical scholarship in Aotearoa/New Zealand considers colonialism as 'living history', or an ongoing process, rather than a narrative of the past. Gibbons has been a long-time proponent of such an approach. However, the distinction between new theories of 'recolonisation' and 'resettlement' and the old imperial history that charted development from colony to nation is often blurred.<sup>48</sup> The new work might draw upon new sources, and include the social and cultural as well as the economic and the political; but it repeats, and hence reinforces, the dates and events of origin and destination.

While new imperial historians tend towards geographically transnational projects, coming from social and cultural perspectives and influenced by the method of 'thick description', postcolonial scholars tend to emphasize local difference. With particular attention to gender, race, place, class and sexuality, postcolonial approaches expose and critique hegemonic Britishness in the colonial past. Postcolonial scholarship has attempted to give priority to the study of indigenous people and women. 'The different interpretations provided by indigenous historians offer revisionist interpretations of many established historical narratives of the British World'.<sup>49</sup> There exists the potential for Maori scholars to respond to, and extend, the parameters of British World scholarship, especially if critical nation-based approaches also grow in strength.

Perhaps the starkest ideological difference between British World and postcolonial scholarship is the tendency of British World scholarship to focus on Britishness and settlers, which has the potential of making a 'settler past' more unified, coherent and posthumously complete. The focus on the 'White Dominions' at the British World conferences effectively led to the exclusion of 'others'. This issue has been of ongoing awkwardness for some, including conference organizers. By the time of the Bristol conference in 2007, it was stated that the primary focus up to Bristol was 'the neo-Britains and settler colonialisms'. The conference organizers now hoped 'to expand the chronological and geographical remit of the British World'. The Bristol conference hoped to 'take stock of what has been done to date, provide avenues for new research agendas and most importantly continue to map and define what is meant by the British World'.<sup>50</sup> For postcolonial scholars, this was potentially reinforcing and celebrating Britishness, rather than problematizing it.

Indeed, one effect of the return to a British World focus is to normalize the settler experience and presence. In 2000 Gillian Whitlock suggested that 'Thinking about settlers is deeply unfashionable in postcolonial criticism'.<sup>51</sup> However, the rise of British World scholarship has quickly made 'settler studies' acceptable and cutting edge. This is effectively a return to imperial history's unashamed concern with imperial expansion, of colonization, immigration and the setting up of trade. When settler nations developed their own historiographies it was according to what Dipesh Chakrabarty has identified as the "'first in Europe, then elsewhere" structure of global historical time'.<sup>52</sup> The initial focus was upon settlers, with indigenous peoples and multiculturalism marginalized. More recently, the focus

of postcolonial scholarship has shifted to emphasize the relationship between ‘natives and newcomers’ in colonial encounters. While the search for diversity and multiple identities was pursued, the primary focus was on celebrating uniqueness, rather than seeking counterparts.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand where the bicultural present and the Treaty of Waitangi are accorded ongoing importance, a focus on settlers is awkward. Paradoxically, rather than downplaying the influences of a British imperial past, in the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand both traditional and postcolonial approaches to history share a focus on Britishness. That is, unlike Buckner’s rallying cry for Canada, there was no need to ask ‘Whatever happened to the British Empire?’ as New Zealand’s underlying imperial past is never far from the historiographical surface, with its importance obvious.<sup>53</sup>

So important is the colonial experience in New Zealand’s past that it is an obvious and underlying concern for historians currently writing about a wide variety of topics. Catharine Coleborne revealed the importance of both colonial law and transcolonial mental health.<sup>54</sup> Lyndon Fraser and I explored migration in the colonial context.<sup>55</sup> Giselle Byrnes examined land surveying as an instrument of colonization.<sup>56</sup> Tony Ballantyne and Chris Hilliard approached colonization from via intellectual history.<sup>57</sup> Luke Trainor’s and Lydia Wevers’s work, along with Hilliard’s, explored colonization through writing and publishing.<sup>58</sup>

Despite this emphasis on colonialism as a cornerstone of New Zealand’s past, the limitations of postcolonialism in the New Zealand context have also been the focus of debate. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith posed challenging questions for historians concerning research, writing and colonialism. She engages with and critiques Western postcolonial scholarship, revealing its limitations and its ongoing impact on indigenous peoples, and in particular, Maori.<sup>59</sup> Also wary of postcolonial claims, Byrnes examined Waitangi Tribunal history as postcolonial history and asked whether postcolonial narratives are ‘empowering and liberating, or disabling and neo-colonialist’.<sup>60</sup> Byrnes treated the term postcolonialism as ‘problematic’ (as it implies an endpoint to colonization) and echoed the concerns raised by Bella Te Aku Graham, Leonie Pihama and others that postcolonialism runs the risk of being ‘a form of intellectual recolonisation’.<sup>61</sup> Both Tuhiwai Smith and Byrnes expressed the view, in common with postcolonial approaches, that colonization continues. As Antoinette Burton has reminded us, colonialism is ‘unfinished business’.<sup>62</sup>

Writing from Aotearoa/New Zealand, the convergence of postcolonial and British World approaches is most obvious in the current theme of doing history that extends beyond the nation-state. Ironically for those postcolonial scholars who question the constitutional and political scaffolding of the past, adopting a British World approach has been suggested as a way of moving beyond the nation.<sup>63</sup> In *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Byrnes suggested that ‘[t]he British World attracts increasing attention from a variety of researchers who seek to escape the confines of national history’.<sup>64</sup> Aligned with British World scholarship, postcolonial scholarship has looked transnationally for new directions. In 2003, reacting in large part to reassertions of cultural nationalism, Gibbons proposed that ‘It is time scholars in these lands were less preoccupied with asserting national identity and divining “New Zealand’s place in the world” and paid much more

attention to the world's place in New Zealand'.<sup>65</sup> Gibbons suggested a 'world history approach', and pointed out that 'before it was any kind of political and constitutional entity, or any kind of entity at all except a cartographic one, New Zealand was a series of opportunities for circulating artefacts within the world system and the ports were locations of exchanges of goods and services'.<sup>66</sup> While Gibbons's spotlight on 'encounters' had the potential to include social and cultural history, the transnational focus, ironically, posits postcolonial thinking in the same geographical space as the British World scholarship and its networks — the ideology of which postcolonialism first set out to challenge.

Moving from a nation-based approach, however, poses a number of important challenges. Putting up boundaries around the geographical remit of the British world is difficult and questionable. The term 'British World' has led to the construction of arbitrary fences that can be exclusionary and reinforce the imperial past. Angela Woollacott has cautioned against drawing such boundaries, arguing that in the past there was constant change and challenge.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, in the case of British nurse Edith Cavell, executed in 1915, the location of commemoration demonstrates that the 'British world' always had porous and ever-shifting boundaries and was intersected by an 'Allied world' that included the United States and Continental Europe.<sup>68</sup> Even the most typical cases of Britishness have atypical boundaries. Drawing the United States into a common frame of analysis with other places that include Aotearoa/New Zealand has emerged as a new focus.<sup>69</sup> Mindful of boundary pitfalls, in *Replenishing the Earth*, James Belich mainstreamed the United States of America into his work, stretching the 'British world' definition beyond the neo-British Dominions, and in doing so he revealed the limits of commonly drawn British World boundaries.

If J.G.A. Pocock was a catalyst for British World scholarship, then it is another New Zealander, James Belich, who is setting the important intellectual trends in current British World scholarship. In *Replenishing the Earth* Belich released the potential of full-blown British World scholarship; and he did so without even indexing 'British world'. Well-versed in imperial and commonwealth history, Belich has written an imperial history *par excellence*. He reconfigures the British World to be defined by those who spoke English. He writes of the 'Anglo-World' in the same fashion as Niall Ferguson has written about 'Anglobalization'.<sup>70</sup> Belich declared that his book 'attempts to understand and explain this great Anglo explosion and to do so without fear or favour, celebration or denial'.<sup>71</sup> He sought to explain 'elephantiasis or divergence', imperial greatness by another name.<sup>72</sup> It appears that he is writing 'new' imperial history that has much in common with previously out-moded approaches. Yet, he can be critiqued for what Amitav Ghosh has termed the 'Anglophone imperium'.<sup>73</sup> That is, Belich has trumped British World exponents, adding North America into the mix and uniting a big, white, Anglo-world empire that colonizing predecessors would be proud of. The focus on technology, economic and culture gives *Replenishing the Earth* much in common with pre-counter-cultural traditional imperial history and historical geography.<sup>74</sup> The local has gone, the textual turn is absent, and there is a return to empiricism. There is the new underlying assumption of indigenous people as protagonists — yet this is left undeveloped in such a global approach. Where at least in previous

accounts indigenous peoples were victims and marginal, now they are silent, missing in action.

Nevertheless, Belich encompasses the common ground of British World and postcolonial approaches: that is, he moves beyond national boundaries to write transnational history, questioning cultural cringe and the core and periphery relationship. He has written global, Anglo-world history from the periphery of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Belich is also postcolonial in that he is vaguely provincializing Europe, making reference to 'Old Britain'. In his approach to questions of race, Belich is aligned with postcolonial scholar Robert Young's work on English ethnicity. While Young writes that 'Britishness' is a recent invention and examines the intellectual history of ethnicity, in a similar vein, Belich explores the distinction between Anglo-Saxonism and the 'Anglo-World'.<sup>75</sup> There is also no major point of contention between Catherine Hall and Belich on Englishness, with both scholars emphasizing the importance of historical context in the construction of ethnicity.<sup>76</sup>

Where Belich appears to advance traditional imperial history, he also manages to encompass postcolonial terrain. Rather than critiquing the imperial past, Belich's history returns to the idea of success, simultaneously 'freeing it from the shackles of the normative'.<sup>77</sup> Hence, in trumping fashion, he both problematizes or 'deconstructs' imperial history, and at the same time reasserts its success.

As already revealed, reasserting a confident place for Britishness is a theme in British World scholarship. There is a sense of grievance in coming from a disadvantaged position, rather than from complicity in the hegemonic past. Phillip Buckner argues that since the end of empire historians concerned with the imperial relationship have been on the back foot.<sup>78</sup> Echoing Buckner's defensive approach to studying Britishness, Belich writes that 'Canadian historians stressing the British connection have been denounced as "imperial apologists". New Zealand's leading historian, John Pocock, has been accused of sentimental nostalgia for doing the same thing.' Belich rejects adopting an awkward status, instead going on the offensive and refusing to cringe or be embarrassed about the British past.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, from a postcolonial perspective, it is the awkward and the uncomfortable that is the most interesting and the most worthy of examination in 'unsettling' the past.<sup>80</sup> Digging in that direction, however, is not always the focus of British World scholarship. Writing under the British World rubric, for example, Andrew Smith returned to a grand narrative of imperial success to defend 'the basic idea that Britain's impact on Canada was largely positive'.<sup>81</sup>

James Belich is part of a British World trend to 'bring back the settlers'; perhaps verging on, if not altogether identical to, a revised pioneer history. Defining what constitutes a settler society is both methodologically and politically important. For those with economic interests, a key feature of the 'white Dominions' of Canada, Australia and New Zealand was their history of economic dependence upon Britain.<sup>82</sup> For Donald Denoon, 'settler capitalism' was the key to colonial development, with settler societies sharing migration from the core, and capital and market opportunities. He also saw geography as important, with mid-latitude environments leading to extensive pastoral grazing.<sup>83</sup> Belich asserted, 'Histories of settler societies, and of their indigenous rivals, that ignore boom, bust and

export rescue are like rural histories without seasons'.<sup>84</sup>

*Replenishing the Earth* leads British World scholarship far away from social and cultural postcolonial scholarship. Nira Yuval-Davis and Daiva Stasiulis's edited volume *Unsettling Settler Societies* was concerned with critically examining the meanings of 'settler societies'. It gathered together a diverse collection of authors to discuss gender, race and ethnicity, and chose to examine settler societies as attempts by European migrants to build 'self-sustaining states independent of metropolitan centres'. The common feature of settler societies was seen as being settler domination over 'indigenous populations as well as other racialized minorities'.<sup>85</sup> Veering away from such analysis, British World scholarship enables the uncritical assertion of the term 'settler', a term that reinforces the status of settlers each time it is used. There is even a new journal of 'Settler Studies' starting. Due to their inherently political connotations, the terms 'settlers' and 'whiteness' can be awkward to employ. Indeed, those who do focus on race are newly highlighting 'whiteness', thus running the risk of reasserting whiteness and Britishness. Appropriated from colonial history, these terms can oversimplify past racial identities. Moreover, the use of this terminology has come at a time when a strong branch of postcolonial scholarship has moved towards literary and anthropology-influenced examinations of between-ness, encounters, embodiment and intimacy.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, by moving 'between worlds' — in the case of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Maori and Pakeha — another strand of historical postcolonial scholarship has been about the interaction of settler and indigenous peoples.<sup>87</sup> Further afield, there is a body of work featuring locations of the former British Empire that moves beyond indigenous peoples as victims to explore the interactions between indigenous peoples and settlers. The works of Patricia Grimshaw and Russell McGregor, Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds, and Lynette Russell takes this approach.<sup>88</sup> If J.G.A. Pocock and James Belich are claimed as having contributed to the British World scholarship, another New Zealander, Patricia Grimshaw, should be acknowledged for her leading role in developing postcolonial historical scholarship.<sup>89</sup>

Juxtaposed against *Replenishing the Earth* as the extreme example of a British World approach, there is a call from postcolonial scholars to highlight and renew 'the epistemological questions that have animated the field from its inception'. Themes of dominance and resistance, representation, the constitution of the colonial archive, the relationship between race and class, the significance of gender and sexuality and 'the complex forms in which subjectivities are experienced and collectivities mobilized' are still paramount for postcolonial scholarship.<sup>90</sup> Here the scope of investigation, as Gibbons urged, moves critically beyond national identity, and is mindful of global relevance. Yet enquiry can simultaneously be nation-based, lest the vital significance of evolving factors including local agency, resistance, appropriation, hybridity and mimicry be ignored. As Marilyn Lake has argued, the ongoing power of the nation-state in historiography and activism demands critical attention.<sup>91</sup> For Aotearoa/New Zealand, this is as obvious as it is awkward and historiographically challenging.

The British World approach has united a large number of scholars for whom the British past is important in their areas of historical analysis. For those

scholars currently thinking and writing about Aotearoa/New Zealand, the major themes of British World scholarship are obvious: questioning the core/periphery relationship, thinking transnationally beyond the nation and including Britishness in examinations of the past. There is no need historiographically to ‘rediscover’ the British world, as it has not yet been lost, and Aotearoa/New Zealand’s unique relationship with the Crown gives scholarship a different flavour than Australian history. Surely it is not coincidence that those who have been important in the development of a British World approach, J.G.A. Pocock and James Belich, have written from (and about) Aotearoa/New Zealand, while on the other hand, those who have critiqued and extended such an approach, such as Gibbons and Patricia Grimshaw, have also ‘grown out’ of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

*Replenishing the Earth* reveals the full extent of a British World approach. It also sets a challenge for those employing postcolonial approaches to clarify their points of difference. The narrative approach of postcolonial history has led it to be located in very similar terrain as imperial history — often with the same themes but with a different way of approaching these themes. Postcolonial scholarship should be wary of looking to the British World scholarship for direction. The clearest division between the postcolonial and British World approaches is between literary influences and the cultural turn of the former, and the political and economic approaches of the latter. Finding ways of bridging such gaps, however, has been a part of scholarship since before the current British World revival — most tangibly as the body of works comprising the *Studies in Imperialism* series.

When considering the relationship between postcolonial and British World historiographies, it is timely to remember Audre Lorde’s warning that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’.<sup>92</sup> The scaffolding created to write the past, that is, the words we choose, must be carefully selected and rigorously defensible. For example, the current usage of ‘settler’, ‘whiteness’ and ‘British’ involves sharing the language of imperialism in name and, perhaps, nature. At the same time as there is a move towards transnational histories, there is a risk of disengaging from locally situated knowledge, and empirically over-generalizing the contested, incomplete terrain of the past. As Gibbons advocated, it is time to regroup and move forward with more radical analyses. This involves avoiding general, generic, success history, and instead embracing the awkward and the unique. It involves carefully reconsidering developing the relationship between transnational and unsettled nation-based approaches. While there are well-rehearsed, obvious transnational synergies relevant for the histories of Aotearoa/New Zealand, it is national difference that is of greatest significance. Doing decolonized history means critically detaching from complicity with national identity, and finding a new, always contested, place to stand.

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## NOTES

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