

*Redefining the Bonds of Commonwealth, 1939–1948: The Politics of Preference.* By Francine McKenzie. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2002. 351 pp. UK price: £45.00. ISBN 0-333-98094-8.

THIS IS AN IMPORTANT BOOK on a neglected topic. It combines detailed analysis of the debates between 1943 and 1948 about imperial preferences with generalizations about Commonwealth history. Its central purpose is to 'insert national history into the Commonwealth and reinsert the Commonwealth into national history' (p.263). Close study of the archival and private records in Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the USA on negotiations about a new international trading order after the Second World War was supplemented by interviews with seven surviving negotiators. At the centre of it all were the American quest for 'freer trade' and a crusade to eliminate the 'imperial preferences' that was frustrated by the British and dominions' inclination to preserve preferences in face of US protectionist tariffs. American official policy was based on article seven of the Mutual Assistance Agreement of 1942 under lend-lease, which looked to the elimination of all forms of discriminatory treatment in international commerce. Preliminary discussions began in 1943 and culminated in the UN Geneva Conference on Trade and Employment of 1947 that produced the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the subsequent Havana Conference, where the intended International Trade Organization was abandoned.

In studying these somewhat tortuous negotiations the author gives due consideration to the separate perspectives of Britain, the dominions and the USA and views them in four contexts — national self-interest; Commonwealth co-operation; bi-lateral British–US relations; and multi-lateral international relations. The American crusade for trade liberalization was vitiated by domestic protectionists. (President Truman had to veto a wool bill passed by Congress in 1947 to save the Geneva negotiations.) Britain's initial willingness to modify imperial preferences to get better access to American markets was eroded by the emotional attachment to imperial preferences as a symbol of Britain's role in the Commonwealth and by the dominions' own protectionist tendencies.

In the end, compromises were made, induced by non-commercial forces. The British kept going on their big American loan that was granted for Cold War reasons, even though imperial preferences were not eliminated. But after 1947 they became a diminishing element in the Commonwealth. This association continued as a valuable forum, but Francine McKenzie asserts it 'would have to become a part of the world, and not exist as a world unto itself' (p.237).

The author's meticulous analysis of the multifarious negotiations between 1943 and 1948 provides a fascinating insight into the growth of dominion independence. There are a few misconceptions. She says the word 'independence' was excluded from the Hertzog-proposed status formula of 1926 on Australian insistence, when the demand came from Mackenzie King, who said he could not take a declaration of independence back to Canada. She subscribes to the myth that New Zealand was a belligerent before Britain on 3 September 1939, which was impossible because New Zealand's decision followed Britain's declaration and was formally timed to coincide (11.30 am in London; 9.30 pm in Wellington). She says Keith Hancock, editor of the Civil Series of the official British war histories, was 'also a serviceman', when he was, in fact, a fire watcher. These are minor blemishes in a valuable study.

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