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'This Small Island': Britain, Size and Empire

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HOW THE BRITISH EMPIRE is generally imagined has been shaped, more than anything else, by a single, insufficiently examined image. Once a staple of atlases and school texts, this image remains embedded in history books and is part of our mental furniture even now. It takes the form, of course, of a map. Britain and Ireland are depicted occupying a space near the centre of the displayed world and coloured an identical shade of red or pink. Around the outer circle of the map is a succession of land masses—Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Indian sub-continent, large swathes of Africa, assorted Caribbean islands and more—all of them coloured the same red or pink as Britain itself. In some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century versions, Australia and New Zealand are even represented twice over, so that the world will appear bounded on each side by British imperial territory, by land masses that are coloured red or pink.[1]

As the last expedient makes clear, this particular study in scarlet was an exercise in invention and propaganda, and not simply boastful cartography. The map's Mercator projection, and its use of the Greenwich meridian (which in 1884 and with British prompting became global currency) had the effect of situating the United Kingdom arbitrarily but not accidentally near the centre of the world, while also making Europe as a whole appear

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[1] The reach and resonance over time of this particular piece of cartography requires detailed analysis. Its impact on a young New Zealander between the wars emerges in a recent autobiography. 'I was increasingly awed by the map. How vast the globe was, and how proud I was to be British: why, a whole third of the nations were coloured red, which meant we governed it': Fay Weldon, *Auto Da Fay* (London, 2002), p. 62.

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bigger in relation to other continents than was warranted by its physical size.[2] In addition, and by allocating them a common roseate colour, this map lent the different sectors of the British empire a far greater degree of unity and susceptibility to possession than ever characterised them in fact. But the most significant sleight of hand was so audacious that perversely it generally goes unnoticed. Because the same red or pink shading was employed in this map for the United Kingdom, as for Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, India, and Australia etc., the spectator's eye was distracted from the smallness of the former, to the size and spread of the latter territories. The world-wide expanse of the empire was foregrounded, while the physical limits of the islands at its core were adroitly obscured in the overall design.

Just how marked those physical limits are by global standards is made explicit in the German scholar Arno Peters's revisionist map (Fig. 1), which abandons the Mercator projection and so de-centres Britain and the rest of Europe, while offering a more accurate, though no less politically-driven guide to the relative size of each continent. Britain's conspicuous smallness is further emphasised if the dimensions of today's great powers are called to mind. The United States is over 3000 miles from sea to shining sea, and—like China—covers more than three and a half million square miles. The borders of the Russian Federation remain in flux, but it is still close to six million square miles in extent; while India, which Britain sought to govern before 1947, contains some 1.2 million square miles. By contrast, Britain and Ireland together make up less than 125,000 square miles; Britain itself is smaller than the island of Madagascar.[3] To be sure, all of the European states that once presided over maritime empires appear small when compared with today's major powers; and geo-political size has rarely anyway been the prime determinant of global influence. But it bears stressing that the imperial British state (and still more the pre-1707 English state) was modest in size even by comparison with some of the eastern and western European powers it competed with at the time, France, Spain, Ottoman Turkey, Russia, post-1870 Germany. And the extent of the disparity between Britain's limited size on the one hand, and the scale and considerable durability of its overseas territories on the other, was remarkable. By the early twentieth century, the Dutch empire was perhaps fifty times bigger than the Netherlands, while the French empire was some

[2] For an example of a world map on Mercator's projection of 1893, see Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World 1600–1850* (London, 2002), pp. 2–3. The most recent account of this projection and its legacies is Nicholas Crane, *Mercator: The Man who mapped the Planet* (London, 2002).

[3] These figures have been taken from *Whitaker's Almanac* (London, 2002).

Figure 1. The Peters World Map.

eighteen times the size of France itself. By contrast, and as was recognised at the time, Britain claimed authority over a global empire 125 times bigger than its own home islands.[4]

The complacency which this statistic once inspired has long since receded, but self-congratulation at the fact that a set of small islands once laid claim to the biggest empire in world history has not been adequately succeeded by specific scholarly analysis. In part, this is because matters to do with geography are commonly treated 'as an inert backdrop to historical events', rather than as something that historians are bound to investigate.[5] Incuriosity about the imperial ramifications of British smallness is mainly to be attributed however to an amalgam of whiggishness and over-specialization. Armoured by the knowledge that mid-Victorian Britain ruled over an empire upon which the sun never set, imperial historians have customarily and understandably focused on those factors that enabled it to obtain an edge over larger, more militaristic rivals: its banking and fiscal systems, its precociously centralised state, its maritime reach, and the symbiosis between its financial, mercantile, and landed elites. In the process, the sheer strangeness of Britain's imperial progress has sometimes been lost sight of, as has the degree to which many seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early nineteenth-century Britons—lacking the gift of prophecy—saw in overseas ventures mainly danger, difficulty, and disadvantages.

Among domestic historians of early modern Britain, it is a commonplace that patriotic self-regard and ambition co-existed with a rich vein of panic and paranoia. What has subsequently been viewed as a financial revolution facilitating warlike success and imperial expansion appeared to many Britons at the time as a source of terrible risk and instability. By the same token, expanding overseas commerce was frequently judged to be detrimental to Britain's own integrity; while, until the Napoleonic Wars and to a lesser degree beyond, Britain's swollen National Debt and its growing weight of taxation were regularly perceived as ruinous and unsustainable. Most of all, its native smallness, when set against the resources of major European (and non-European) rivals, provoked doubt, unease and sometimes even despair. As Julian Hoppit observes: 'Even if some of these anxieties were imagined rather than real, self-interested rather than general, because they were felt in so many different ways they had a pervasive influence.'[6] If the imperial consequences of all

[4] Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 1068–9.

[5] Introduction to Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith (eds.), *Geography and Empire* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 1–2.

[6] Julian Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty? England 1689–1727* (Oxford, 2000), p. 5. The anxieties provoked by precisely those developments which have subsequently been viewed as tending

this have not been fully acknowledged, it is in large part because those expert at the domestic histories of these islands are still often neglectful of the activities of English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh men and women outside them. Conversely, imperial historians, area studies specialists, and post-colonial critics have not always been much concerned with, or well informed about the internal histories of the British. Investigating Britain, size and empire—the interconnections between conspicuous smallness on the one hand and presumptuous world-wide activism on the other—demands then a building of bridges between different specialisations and historiographies. It also requires paying attention to changing perceptions of size and power as well as to their actual levels.

Up to the early 1800s, as C. A. Bayly has commented, even many well-informed Britons remained apprehensive that their state was too small to accomplish great things.[7] This nervousness was as much a function of demography as geography. It is now clear that much of early modern Britain and Ireland experienced a healthy rate of population growth by European standards, but such take-off as occurred was from a notably small base, barely three million souls as far as England in 1550 was concerned, as compared with France's seventeen million inhabitants at that time, or Spain's nine million. So while some early pundits like the Hakluyts and the ambassador and writer Thomas Bowdler felt able to champion empire as a benevolent release for England's excess population, others denounced overseas ventures as a dangerous drain on a vulnerable and still under-populated metropolitan economy.[8] Thus Josiah Child, Charles Davenant, and William Wood, perhaps the three most influential writers on the political economy of England's plantations in the late Stuart era, felt obliged to refute charges that the colonies 'would destroy the metropolis by drawing migrants across the Atlantic'.[9]

Pessimism on this score became more vocal in the eighteenth century, in part because a greater availability of urban mortality statistics was not matched before 1801 by any comprehensive attempt at a British census.

inexorably towards Britain's imperial expansion are also made clear in the next volume of the New Oxford History of England. See Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 619–21, 636, 643, and 648.

[7] C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780–1830* (London, 1989), p. 3.

[8] And even Bowdler attacked ventures to Asia 'because these resulted in the loss to England not only of bullion but also of sailors who were essential to Britain's security: "not one in ten returning" from such voyages'. See the introduction to Nicholas Canny (ed.), *The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), p. 19.

[9] David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 166–7; and see Canny, *Origins of Empire,* pp. 1–33. Population figures are taken from E. A. Wrigley *et al*., *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 547–8.

Consequently, politicians and commentators were left free to worry that Britain's population was declining in real as well as in relative terms, and that imperial adventures were making this worse. 'At home we are shrinking into depopulation to a degree melancholy to those who observe and reflect', wrote Horace Walpole in 1759: '. . . drained and wasted by commerce, colonies, [and] gin'. 'I shall not spend time', observed another pamphleteer mournfully in 1765, 'in enumerating the various ways in which our colonies drain us of people.' The 'deficiency and want of people in Great Britain', warned the colonial expert John Mitchell three years later, was scarcely compatible with an effective peopling and securing of 'all the British dominions'.[10]

As Bernard Bailyn describes, some of the anxiety characterising British policy towards America in the three decades before 1776 can be attributed to such unfounded fears of British demographic decline on the one hand, and to a fully-justified awareness on the other that American colonists were multiplying at an ever faster rate. Between 1650 and 1750, the number of Anglo settlers in North America went from being a hundredth, to a fifth of England's own current population; while by 1770 the population of the Thirteen Colonies is estimated to have risen to a third of the total of England's inhabitants.[11] Little wonder, then, that George Grenville should have warned Parliament, even before the Seven Years War, that Britain, like Spain, risked being dispeopled by its American empire, or that Lord Hillsborough, Secretary of State for America, subsequently sought to curb British emigration and westwards expansion there. Little wonder that Samuel Johnson argued on the eve of the Revolution, that unless firm imperial control was imposed, America—as Tom Paine boasted—would become too big for rule by a small island: 'if they should continue to double and double, their own hemisphere would not contain them'.[12]

Anxiety about the rate of British migration to colonial America was sharpened by the fact that most of the emigrants involved were young

[10] John Mitchell, *The Present State of Great Britain and North America* (London, 1767), pp. vii–viii; Horace Walpole, *Reflections on the Different Ideas of the French and English, in regard to Cruelty* (London, 1759), pp. 36–7; 'Cato', *Thoughts on a Question of Importance whether it is probable that the immense extent of territory acquired by this nation . . . will operate towards the prosperity, or the ruin of the island of Great Britain* (London, 1765), p. 21.

[11] Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1988), especially pp. 3–66. Population estimates from Jacob M. Price, 'The Imperial Economy, 1700–1776' in P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), p. 100.

[12] See the account of Grenville's speech to the Commons on 8 May 1753: L. F. Stock (ed.), *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments respecting North America*, 5 vols. (Washington, DC, 1924–41), V, pp. 566–7; R. W. Chapman (ed.), *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (Oxford, 1970), p. 592.

males under thirty, the very cohort upon which Britain's economy and above all its military most relied. This points to a further respect in which British smallness could appear at odds with successful and enduring imperial enterprise. As has often been pointed out, the size of Britain's armed forces never remotely keep pace with the range of its global interventions. This was true even at sea. Britain's expanding maritime presence after the seventeenth century was itself a major challenge. These islands were never able to generate enough seamen by themselves 'to supply the wartime needs of both the navy and the merchant service'. Hence Parliament's decision in 1740 to allow up to three-quarters of 'British' merchant seamen in wartime to be foreigners in fact.[13] Even so, the Admiralty still worried in 1756 that the demands of participating in and safeguarding global commerce on the one hand and global expansion on the other were too much of a leech on Britain's native resources and security:

> If our possessions and commerce increase, our cares and our difficulties are increased likewise; that commerce and those possessions being extended all over the world must be defended by sea, having no other defence. Those distant possessions have in reality lessened the security arising from our situation as an island. We are vulnerable there and less invulnerable at home on their account.[14]

But pressures on Britain's maritime manpower—and contemporary awareness of and anxieties about those pressures—were as nothing compared to the demands on its army and concerns about this.

After 1688, the British became increasingly and necessarily adept at recruiting domestic manpower and hiring foreign mercenaries for specific major wars, but these suddenly swollen legions (which were anyway always recognised to be bigger on paper than in the field) were strictly special occasion fare. They could not be afforded and were never routinely forthcoming in peacetime or for everyday, imperial needs.[15] In the 1720s, when Britain already claimed authority over half a million men and women in North America, large parts of the West Indies, coastal settlements in India, and outposts in the Mediterranean, its standing army is estimated to have been no bigger than the king of Sardinia's. Even in 1850, when approaching the zenith of its power, Britain's indigenous legions remained modest in point of numbers by comparison with those

[13] Daniel A. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, NJ, 1965), p. 147; Isaac Edward Land, 'Domesticating the Maritime: Culture, Masculinity, and Empire in Britain, 1770–1820', Ph.D. thesis (Michigan, 1999), p. 150.

[14] H. W. Richmond (ed.), *Papers relating to the loss of Minorca in 1756*, Navy Records Society Publications, 1913, pp. 208–9.

[15] John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State 1688–1783* (London, 1989).

of Russia, or France, or even Prussia. 'At no time', to quote a military historian, '. . . were the land forces available for the peacetime policing and defence of the [British] empire . . . sufficiently strong for the task.'[16] This might not have mattered had Britain possessed the kind of easy technological superiority often attributed to Western empires, but for a long time, and as far as land warfare was concerned, it did not. As late as 1799, guns, cannon, and ammunition accounted for less than five per cent of Britain's land warfare budget. The rest went on horses, carts, uniforms, swords, pikes, and soldiers' pay, virtually the same staples of land warfare as had existed in the ancient world—and the same staples too as existed in 1799 in much of the non-European world.[17]

Some of the consequences of this combination on Britain's part of global aggression and military insufficiency are obvious enough. The fall of Tangier in 1684, the colony upon which London lavished most resources in the second half of the seventeenth century, was partly attributable to its garrison being only a third in size of what it should have been, and to the besieging Moroccan armies possessing weapons fully comparable to those of the occupying English.[18] The outbreak of the American Revolution was arguably caused less by Parliament's abortive attempts to tax the colonies to pay for 10,000 troops to be stationed there, than by the fact that in the early 1770s there were in practice only 4500 men available to enforce British rule over the vast expanses of Canada, the Thirteen Colonies, Florida, and the western frontier, many of whom were anyway American-born. As an imperial administrator and soldier complained in the early nineteenth century: 'Almost every where it has been a system with us (and a bad one it is), to employ in our expeditions no more men than are barely sufficient,' and this brand of frugality continued to result in stray imperial disasters and major defeats even in the Victorian era.[19]

But the degree to which Britain's indigenous military manpower was over-stretched also had less conspicuous consequences. Historians of the making of the working class have rarely examined Britons in uniform

[16] J. A. Houlding, *Fit for Service: The Training of the British Army 1715–1795* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 7 and 9; and see the tables on mid-nineteenth century army strengths in Miles Taylor, 'The 1848 Revolutions and the British Empire', *Past and Present*, 166 (2000), pp. 150–1.

[17] Patrick O'Brien, 'The impact of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1793–1815, on the long-run growth of the British economy', *Review: Fernand Braudel Center*, 12 (1989), pp. 367–8; and see the essays in Douglas M. Peers (ed.), *Warfare and Empires: Contact and Conflict between European and non-European military and maritime forces and cultures* (Aldershot, 1997).

[18] See E. M. G. Routh, *Tangier: England's lost Atlantic outpost 1661–1684* (London, 1912).

[19] C. W. Pasley, *Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire* (London, 1810), p. 188; Fernand Ouellet, 'The British Army of Occupation in the St. Lawrence Valley' in R. A. Prete (ed.), *Armies of Occupation* (Kingston, Ont., 1984), pp. 38–9.

abroad in tandem with their civilian counterparts at home, yet the five decades after 1780 witnessed an intensification of protest and labour discipline both among domestic workers, and among Britain's imperial soldiery overseas. Although there was growing criticism at this time of the treatment of black slaves, and although the new United States, France, and Prussia all abandoned military flogging during these decades, the use of the whip against Britain's own soldiery—especially in its imperial legions—seems markedly to have increased.[20] In just one year, 1817, almost 700 British troops stationed in the Windward and Leeward Islands were flogged, as were 635 troops in Jamaica. As these figures suggest, flogging at this time was not reserved for a vicious minority: it was part and parcel of being in the lower ranks. In 1822, two out of every five British soldiers stationed in Bermuda suffered the lash.[21] Desperately overstretched, forced to serve overseas for decades without a break because of the dearth of replacements from home, and as a result often angry, recalcitrant and sometimes mutinous, British soldiers in this era of massive imperial expansion were literally and regularly whipped into working and winning. How far standards of living and labour discipline changed within Britain itself between 1780 and 1830 remains a matter of scholarly debate. That treatment of Britain's imperial workers in uniform was particularly harsh at this time seems almost certain, and this harshness was in part a function of insufficient military numbers engaging in unparalleled global exertion.

Here, then, was a three-fold challenge to do with size that had multitudinous imperial repercussions, and that regularly before the early 1800s provoked anxiety and doubt among Britons at home about the feasibility and profit of empire abroad. Britain was small in terms of geography even by the standards of some of its European competitors, never mind as compared with many of the extra-European territories it presumed to invade. In the two centuries before 1801, its population was more often than not believed to be smaller even than it was in fact. And its indigenous military and maritime manpower could seem woefully insufficient for its global ambitions.

[20] The disjunction between those concerned with Britain's domestic and civilian history on the one hand, and its overseas and military histories on the other, is particularly apparent here. Much excellent work has been done on attitudes and activism in Britain about black slavery in the empire after 1770, and about the experiences of its own domestic labour force at this time. But the protests and punishments of its imperial common soldiery—Britons abroad whose experiences were sometimes akin to slavery—have tended to fall unregarded into the crack between different forms of historical concentration. Though see J. R. Dinwiddy, 'The early nineteenth-century campaign against flogging in the army', *English Historical Review*, 97 (1982), 308–31.

[21] [Henry Marshall and Alexander Murray Tulloch], *Statistical Report on the Sickness, Mortality and Invaliding among the Troops in the West Indies* (London, 1838), pp. 10, 49; [Alexander Murray Tulloch] *Statistical Report on . . . the Troops in . . . British America* (London, 1839), p. 10b.

There were, to be sure, some respects in which Britain's smallness bestowed advantages and incentives as far as imperial enterprise was concerned. If emigrants, entrepreneurs, and adventurers left its shores in large numbers over the centuries, if its slavers haggled for chained manpower on the western coasts of Africa, and if its traders ruthlessly invaded other lands and seas in search of raw materials and new markets, some of this—though only some—was due to the home islands seeming too constricted to supply the land, opportunities, manpower, raw materials and markets that were wanted. Recognition that 'Great Britain being insular . . . her territorial extent is consequently stationary', as a writer in *The Oriental Herald* laboriously put it in 1824, could foster a compensatory British extroversion, not to say global house-breaking, violence and theft.[22] It is arguable too that the physical compactness of these islands aided the precocious evolution of a strong centralising administration in the core state, England, and ultimately a formidable capacity to tax and to mobilise men and ideas. While the fact that nowhere in Britain is more than seventy miles from the sea certainly assisted commercial and naval development, with all the wealth and mobility of power that followed.

Yet all this by itself was not enough. As Stephen Lukes argues, the effective exercise of power requires both access to coercive force and the capacity 'to shape and therefore to exclude certain thoughts': and for a long time Britain's elites found it hard to exclude from their own and others' thinking in regard to empire an inhibiting sense of native smallness.[23] 'Our scituation hath made Greatnesse abroad by land Conquests unnaturall things to us,' wrote Lord Halifax wistfully in the 1660s: 'wee are a very little spot in the Map of the World'. Periods of imperial defeat invariably brought such insecurities closer to the surface. 'Away goes the fishery and 20,000 seamen,' Lord Shelburne told the House of Lords as he anticipated the loss of America in the early 1780s: 'After this will follow the West Indian islands, and in the process of time, Ireland itself; so that we should not have a single foot of land beyond the limits of this island.'[24] Even when they were winning, there remained a fear that British imperium was inherently unnatural: 'The extension of our territory and influence has been greater than our means,' worried the future Duke of Wellington in 1800. Britain's capacity for global power, commented

[22] *The Oriental Herald and Colonial Review*, I (1824), p. 92. How far the collective home environment was viewed in insular terms by English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish men and women at different times—their respective imaginary geographies as it were—requires investigation.

[23] Stephen Lukes, *Power: a radical view* (London, 1974), p. 25.

[24] H. V. Bowen, 'British conceptions of global empire, 1756–83', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 26 (1998), 15; Halifax is quoted in Armitage, *Ideological Origins*, pp. 142–3.

another imperial warrior at this time, was like 'an oak planted in a flowerpot', irredeemably compromised by the domestic smallness at its base.[25]

So how did such voices come to be subdued, though never entirely silenced? How did British native smallness come to seem negotiable and fully compatible with global empire? Some have argued that it was the emergence of new racial, scientific, political and religious attitudes from the later eighteenth century onwards that created the necessary 'will, self-confidence, even arrogance', and these certainly played a part.[26] Yet as more thoughtful and battle-hardened Britons acknowledged at the time, where global power relations were concerned, theories of British and European superiority could never be remotely enough. Language, ideology, and culture had no automatic witchcraft capacity *by themselves* to magic away rudimentary deficiencies in terms of numbers, resources, and available force. 'The maxim believed by the common people of this country, "That one Englishman is equal to two foreigners" . . . may . . . be useful in some cases', wrote an experienced imperial soldier and diplomat wearily in 1810: 'but it is . . . devoid of truth', and he went on to predict that even Britain's maritime dominion was unlikely to endure another thirty years.[27] What was needed in these circumstances was not so much a broad conviction that empire was legitimate or that Europeans were superior (since such notions were already well-entrenched long before 1800), but a more specific conviction that, as far as Britain was concerned, large-scale territorial empire was feasible and sustainable. How, then, was such a conviction temporarily arrived at?

Manifestly, British global pre-eminence after 1815—and rising confidence in it—owed much to developments outside these islands and/or outside their control.[28] But there were also vital changes within Britain or instigated by it that for a while seemed to more than make up for smallness. To begin with, there was a dramatic shift both in real population levels and in how population was perceived. The crucial figure here was Thomas Malthus. Predictably, and for all that he was later employed at the East India Company's Haileybury College, his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) has tended to be analysed only in domestic terms. But the *Essay* was actually a seminal work in the evolution both of

[25] Pasley, *Essay on the Military Policy*, p. 54; J. H. Stocqueler, *The Wellington Manual* (Calcutta, 1840), pp. 195–6.

[26] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), p. 11.

[27] Pasley, *Essay on the Military Policy*, pp. 4 and 44.

[28] See the excellent analysis in Bayly, *Imperial Meridian;* and for a survey of developments outside Britain's empire which nonetheless fostered it, see my 'Yale, America, and the World in 1801', Yale Center for International and Area Studies archive.

imperial arguments and of growing imperial complacency. Before, Britons had often felt fearful that their population was small by European standards and even contracting. After the *Essay's* publication, however, and still more after the results of the first census in 1801 had been digested, most came to accept that Britain's population was expanding at a rapid, even an uncontrollable rate. The challenge now seemed less too few people, than too many.[29]

Some of the imperial ramifications of this were set out by Patrick Colquhoun, a political arithmetician with close links to the government, in his *Treatise on the Wealth, Power and Resources of the British Empire* in 1814. Starting from the premise that 'the population of states and empires is, perhaps, one of the most interesting and important subjects which can engage the public attention', Colquhoun set out to refute any residual fears that Britain's human resources were insufficient, as well as any Smithian economists who still doubted the profitability of territorial empire. Accordingly, he deluged his readers with statistics about the economy, and about the troop numbers now at Britain's disposal, and with information culled from the second census of 1811, all in order to demonstrate what he called 'the practicality of conquest'.[30] A subsequent publication was still more explicit. Empire, properly viewed, this writer insisted, was not inimical to Britain's economy and demographic well-being, but indispensable to both. Every five years, Britain needed to shed 'at least one million of souls'. The 'new' lands and opportunities made available by empire were the providential outlet for Malthus's surplus population: 'colonizing . . . can only be looked to as the means of salvation'. Such arguments never won universal support, but they did become pervasive. By the 1890s, even the foremost American anti-imperialist, Carl Schurz (whose critique of imperialism on both sides of the Atlantic remains worth reading), was prepared to accept that 'Nothing could be more natural than that, as the population pressed against [their] . . . narrow boundaries, Englishmen should have swarmed all over the world.' Before 1800, this version of cause and effect had appeared natural only intermittently and to some.[31]

[29] For a recent edition of the *Essay* with an excellent introduction, see E. A. Wrigley and David Souden (eds.), *The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus*, 8 vols. (London, 1986), I.

[30] Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Wealth, Power, and Resources of the British Empire* (London, 1815 edn.), pp. 1 and 196 and *passim*; and see J. E Cookson, 'Political arithmetic and war in Britain, 1793–1815', *War and Society*, 1 (1983), 37–60.

[31] Frederic Bancroft (ed.), *Speeches, Correspondence and Political Papers of Carl Schurz*, 6 vols. (New York, 1913), VI. 19–20; *Memoir on the Necessity of Colonization at the Present Period* (London, 1817).

There was another major domestic transformation that helped to counter concerns about British smallness. As Fernand Braudel once suggested, it was in part because rich deposits of coal and iron, together with abundant water power, were situated so closely and conveniently together within Britain's compact boundaries that it proved able to generate the world's first fully-fledged, mineral-based industrial revolution, though the full impact of this took far longer to emerge than once was supposed. Even in 1800, it was still possible by some economic criteria to think in terms of 'a polycentric world with no dominant centre' in Kenneth Pomeranz's phrase. But this was emphatically not the case fifty years later.[32] By then, unprecedented levels of industrial innovation and productivity, combined with older commercial and financial riches, had helped make Britain's global power appear far more practicable and even inevitable. Industrial and technological advance meant at one level more lethal and mass-produced weapons of control and coercion. Industrial and technological advance also allowed this set of small islands to address some of the challenges in terms of space and time posed by global empire. Trains, steam ships, and telegraphs spanned distances that had previously appeared unmanageable. Emigrants, soldiers, sailors, administrators, exports and ideas travelled out to imperial destinations at a much faster rate and in far larger quantities; while information, imports and profits flowed back to Britain as never before. And industrial and technological advance helped to foster massive assurance, a sense that British incursions overseas were both amply feasible and a motor of global progress. Victorian publicists cherished the metaphor of Britain as 'the heart' of the global and imperial body, an image that still made some concessions to its intrinsic smallness, but which primarily proclaimed its centrality.[33]

But perhaps industrialisation's most crucial imperial contribution was that once again it worked to neutralise earlier concerns about Britain's inadequate human and material resource base. On the one hand, and as a French visitor to Britain commented, the new machinery effectively multiplied manpower by lessening the amount of physical work men (if not

[32] Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), p. 4. For Braudel on the possible relations between territorial size and economic modernisation, see his *The Perspective of the World*, trans. Siân Reynolds (London, 1984), especially pp. 289–325.

[33] The scholarly literature on these developments is enormous. For a recent specific study, see Peter J. Hugill, *Global Communications since 1844: Geopolitics and Technology* (London, 1999); and see the essays in A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London, 2002).

women) had to do.[34] More mechanised, less worker-intensive agriculture and industry eased earlier apprehensions that losing young males to the army overseas or to colonial emigration would rob the domestic economy of essential players. On the other hand, the extra jobs and productivity that industrialisation also provided allowed Britain's population—though not Ireland's—to come close to quadrupling over the nineteenth century without any of the subsistence crises that Malthus had predicted. This unprecedented population growth helped Victorian and Edwardian Britons to regard the steady haemorrhage of soldiers, sailors, and administrators from their shores, and the loss of twelve million emigrants between 1815 and the 1880s alone, with reasonable equanimity. Back in 1771, a Member of Parliament had opposed sending troops to India on the grounds that 'The state of our population was not very flattering, that the species decreased, and that we ought to keep as many as possible for the defense of Britain'.[35] A century—even half a century—later, it was far easier for such objections to be dismissed as obsolete.

Yet this did not result in a sustained and massive expansion of Britain's own armed forces. The mid-nineteenth century British army remained less than a third of the size of its French counterpart: what changed however was that in imperial terms this parsimonious domestic mobilisation ceased to matter remotely as much as it once had done.

Before 1800, Britain had explored various strategies for padding out its domestic cannon fodder, employing its growing monetary resources to offset in some measure its finite and unimpressive size. Like every other major European state, it hired abundant foreign mercenaries. As the Russian empire did, it also recruited ruthlessly in its own peripheral provinces—in its case the Scottish Highlands and Catholic Ireland—as a means both of raising men for service overseas, and of extending control at home. By 1830, Irish Catholics may have made up over fifty per cent of Britain's white troops in India.[36] In one respect, however, the British state had been less effective than some of its main competitors in supplementing its indigenous manpower: for a long time it failed to capitalise fully on the possibility of recruiting soldiers who were not white.

There were, to be sure, sporadic moves in this direction. In 1710, Queen Anne and her ministers famously devoted both money and imagination to the London visit of the so-called 'Four Indian kings'. These

[34] The Abbé Le Blanc cited in Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (London, 1982), p. 25.
[35] Quoted in Arthur N. Gilbert, 'Recruitment and reform in the East India Company army, 1760–1800', *Journal of British Studies*, 15 (1975), 99.
[36] I owe this information to Professor C. A. Bayly.

were in fact four young men on the make from the powerful Iroquois confederation of upper New York, and they were fêted and made much of in the hope that they would raise warriors in aid of a forthcoming British invasion of French Canada.[37] Yet, for some time, stray initiatives such as this were not systematically and extensively followed up. Even after the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756, British colonial officials remained—as they acknowledged—less effective than the French at rallying and above all retaining indigenous North American manpower. Even had the British been more adept, however, the potential for converting Native Americans into the fodder of imperial legions would still have been limited. As the American Revolution demonstrated, arming large numbers of Native Americans easily alienated white colonists. And Native American patterns of migration and agriculture were anyway scarcely compatible with a sustained receptivity to British military discipline.[38]

In India, conditions were very different. And it was its ability eventually to tap and train up extremely large numbers of Indian troops that freed Britain for a while from some of the penalties of military smallness. The story of how the East India Company's sepoy legions emerged from small beginnings in the 1740s has been told many times and is still being rewritten. It needs stressing however that not until the early nineteenth century did this Indian army reach truly mammoth proportions (some 300,000 men by 1820), or British elites in the sub-continent and London finally allow themselves to believe that these troops would remain loyal. For a long time, as is clear from their papers, they were simply unable to believe their luck. A memorandum written in 1805 by Lord Wellesley, Governor General of India, is tinged with all kinds of racist assumptions, but is eloquent too of delighted British relief that the problems of military insufficiency had seemingly been cracked:

> As mercenary troops the natives of India possess obedience, docility, and fidelity beyond all others . . . This happy disposition of the natives of India . . . [They] have assisted us in retaining their own country in subjection with a fidelity scarce less than our own countrymen.

Here was a large, highly effective, supplementary army that was paid for by Indians, that was immune for a long while to parliamentary scrutiny,

[37] See Eric Hinderaker, 'The "Four Indian Kings" and the imaginative construction of the first British Empire', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (1996), 487–526.

[38] On the quality of British-Native American contact and collaboration in the American Revolution and earlier, see Colin Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country* (Cambridge, 1995), and a forthcoming Yale University Ph.D. dissertation by Kirk Davis Swinehart, 'Indians in the Home: Empire and Aristocracy in Mohawk country, 1738–1845'.

and that was available to fight British imperial battles not just in the sub-continent, but increasingly as well in other arenas, Egypt, Malaya, Burma, Afghanistan, China, and more. Here, in Ronald Robinson's and John Gallagher's famous phrase, was 'the rod of order, the shield of defence and the sword for further advance'.[39]

By the Victorian era, then, demographic explosion which was recognised as such, an industrial and communications revolution, and the accession of a very large, cheap, *seemingly* tractable Indian army had helped soothe the anxieties attendant on Britain's native smallness. For some nineteenth-century Britons, indeed, it was not simply a case of smallness ceasing now to disturb: the imagined British community ceased even to seem insular. Victorian and Edwardian cartographers busily charted the hundreds of British underwater telegraph lines and shipping routes between the continents, so that in representational terms—and even for its enemies—Britain appeared, not a fragile dot amidst the oceans, but a spider at the centre of a global web, an octopus with tentacles in every part of the globe. Imperial federationists too sometimes spoke and wrote in terms of what we might now style globalisation theory. 'The world', declared the Liberal MP for Newcastle in 1885 had 'become a whispering gallery', and naturally it spoke English. His fellow enthusiast, the very strange James Stanley Little, even suggested that were Britain to continue creating 'one huge, concrete empire', to it would 'fall the work of racial assimilation', before retreating swiftly from the logic of his argument.[40] But the most influential exponent of the view that empire had effectively cancelled out British islandhood itself was the Cambridge historian, J. R. Seeley.

The very title of his 1883 *magnum opus*, *The Expansion of England*, which would remain in print until the 1950s, proclaimed an essential elasticity of geographical domain. Nothing was more imperative—or more logical—insisted Seeley (using his national terms sloppily) than 'ceasing to say that England is an island':

> What! Our country is small; a poor 120,000 square miles? I find the fact to be very different. I find that the territory governed by the Queen is of almost boundless extent.

[39] Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians* (London, 2nd edn., 1981), p. 13; Confidential memorandum by Lord Wellesley, National Library of Scotland, MS 13653, fol. 5.

[40] Joseph Cowen, MP, quoted in *Expressions of Opinion on Imperial Federation by Public Men at Home and in the Colonies* (London, 1885), p. 7. James Stanley Little, *The United States of Britain* (Guildford, 1887), p. 21; but see, too, his *A World Empire* (London, 1879).

Nor, Seeley claimed, was this elision of country and empire at all inappropriate. Britain's imperial territories were not to be viewed as a congerie of different nations 'held together by force' (though he was uncertain about India in this respect). Rather the empire constituted 'one nation, as much as if it were no empire but an ordinary state'. That this imperial nation-state, this 'Greater Britain' as Seeley called it, was strung across the globe and divided by the oceans mattered not at all. Greater Britain was 'a world-wide Venice, with the sea for streets'. Typically, Seeley drew on post-Malthusian demography to project 'a vast increase of our race', as he called it, as well as a triumphant and definitive escape from insular smallness:

> The density of population in Great Britain is two hundred and ninety-one to the square mile, in Canada it is not much more than one to the square mile. Suppose for a moment the Dominion of Canada peopled as fully as Great Britain, its population would actually be more than a thousand millions.[41]

Here was a vision or rather a fantasy of size unimaginable without end or limit. England expanded indeed.

I cite these extracts, which are sometimes glossed over in favour of Seeley's more responsible passages, for two reasons. First, it needs stressing that his book was both highly influential and very much in line with ideas advanced by many other late nineteenth-century British intellectuals and politicians. The 1870s and 1880s saw at least 150 different schemes being advanced in favour of greater imperial unity, the alluring prospect of Greater Britain.[42] But, second, such schemes to exorcise the spectre of smallness forever were not prompted simply or even mainly by swaggering global triumphalism. They were rather evidence that—by this stage—anxiety about Britain's limited dimensions was reviving.

In part this was because the United States' emergence intact from its civil war, together with the unification of Germany and of Italy, and the continuing expansion of the Russian empire seemed to underline the growing importance of geo-politics. Consider, warned W. E. Forster in 1884: 'how our great Continental neighbours are banding themselves in large nations, with populations constantly increasing, and with their enormous standing armies'. 'Everything seems to indicate', agreed a fellow Liberal MP the next year, 'that we have entered an era when states will be bigger than they have been.'[43] How could Britain conceivably

[41] J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* ed. John Gross (London, 1971), pp. 12, 15, 44, 50, 126, and 227.

[42] Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization*, p. 156.

[43] *Imperial Federation League: Expressions of Opinion*, p. 6; W. E. Forster quoted in *Report of the adjourned conference, and the first meeting of the [Imperial Federation] League* (London, 1885), p. 12.

compete against these new behemoths except by consolidating and even amalgamating with its overseas empire? A commentary by G. H. Johnston, a former Royal Geographer, on a map of the world generously picked out in red and published in honour of Edward VII's coronation in 1902, suggests the revived obsession with size at this time and also what lay behind it. 'The British empire', Johnston wrote, 'is fifty-five times the size of France, fifty-four times the size of Germany, three and a half times the size of the United States of America, with quadruple the population of all the Russias.' These points of comparison were all of course physically bigger powers than the United Kingdom itself; and Johnston's conclusion was just as loaded: 'Greater Britain, that is the possessions of the British people over the seas, is one hundred and twenty five times the size of Great Britain.'[44] Contained and concealed within this extraordinary statistic was once again a growing tremulousness.

* * *

'If a small island acquires a large empire', writes A. G. Hopkins, 'it seems obvious enough that the two cannot be understood in isolation.'[45] In this lecture, I have wanted to draw attention to the connections over the centuries between size, power, national self-image, and British empire. My fundamental concern in doing so has been a historical one. In recent decades, many of the scholars at work on this empire have concentrated either on investigating and restoring agency to those peoples once invaded by Britain, or on scrutinising the impact of empire on Britain itself. I sympathise with both of these research strategies: indeed, much of this lecture has been prompted by a conviction that British domestic historians must look more closely and imaginatively at imperial and global connections. But bridging specialisations should work both ways. Those interested in the internal histories of these islands need to do more to incorporate the overseas and imperial dimension. But, by the same token, both traditional imperial historians and post-colonial commentators require a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the dimensions, inner workings, and domestic sensibilities of Britain itself, the ways in which it was once powerful, but also the ways in which its global clout and confidence were regularly constrained by varieties of smallness.

[44] Commentary by G. H. Johnston on *The Howard Vincent Map of the British Empire* (London, 7th edn., 1902).

[45] A. G. Hopkins, 'Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History', *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), 207.

Acknowledging both the power of Britain's one-time empire, and the degree to which it was characterised at its core by insecurities and persistent constraints is important for more than just historians however. There are those who argue now with great sincerity and passion that Britain's imperial past is a fully known quantity that requires only denunciation or consigning to oblivion: that its study is irrelevant, or inflammatory, or conducive to chauvinism and racism. I believe such arguments to be inadequate, and that a more intelligent, comprehensive and iconoclastic understanding of this empire can prove useful as well as illuminating. It would do no harm for instance for there to be a much wider awareness of the extent to which—because of native smallness—Britain's one-time empire always rested substantially in fact on the backs, bayonets and taxes of those living outside the island of Great Britain. Whatever one thinks of the Raj, it would scarcely have been created without Catholic Irishmen on the one hand, and millions of Indians on the other.[46] A prime lesson of this empire (and other empires) is not national and cultural arrogance, but rather the inevitability of cross-national and cross-cultural collaborations. Then again a broader recognition that the British empire was always and necessarily dependent on bluff, accident, and the assistance of others might counter the crippling and persistent notion that the fall of the British empire somehow betokened a failure of national grit and verve. As Paul Kennedy once suggested, given Britain's obvious limitations, what was remarkable was that its empire lasted as long as it did, not its ultimate and entirely predictable demise.[47]

British politicians especially might usefully wean themselves from the notion that a grand, intrinsic national destiny has somehow got lost along the way. The initial part of the title of this lecture is taken from Winston Churchill who once remarked that: 'We in this small island have to make a supreme effort to keep our place and status, the place and status to which our undying genius entitles us.'[48] As this suggests, one relic of empire has sometimes been a markedly schizoid sense of national self and size, a perception that while Britain is naturally small, it is also simultaneously and deservedly large. It seems likely—as Peter Marshall has suggested—that this misperception of our real size and significance has sometimes got in the way of our post-war, post-imperial relations with the

[46] This is not to say that the contribution and perceived roles of these two groupings were identical.

[47] Paul Kennedy, 'Why did the British empire last so long?' in his *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945* (London, 1983), pp. 197–218.

[48] Quoted in Correlli Barnett, *The Verdict of Peace* (London, 2001), p. 81.

rest of Europe.[49] It is also possible that a yearning for a special global status in the wake of lost empire—a conviction that we must somehow always punch above our weight (why?)—has encouraged a persistent inclination to pursue empire vicariously by clambering like a mouse on the American eagle's head. Either way, a truer, more unillusioned perception of our real domestic dimensions would not come amiss.

But there is a final, more important and more global point. Today we may live in a post-colonial world, but we do not yet live in a post-imperial world. Although they operate under the trade name of nations, current great powers like Indonesia, Russia, India, the USA and China all retain in fact some markedly imperial tendencies and characteristics. And questions about the complex relationship between size and empire are pertinent in relation to these powers too. The sheer size of these twenty-first-century covert empires means that they are most unlikely to seize extensive overseas territory as the old European empires once did. They have no need. It was in part the very smallness of the old European powers that prompted them—conspicuously so in Britain's case—to engage in overseas aggression and invasions. However, precisely because these new twenty-first-century behemoths are so massive in terms of their domestic size, *their* varieties of empire are likely to endure far longer than the old maritime empires once did. Either way, and this is the moral of this lecture, size does matter and must be taken seriously and not for granted. Exactly how size matters at different times, however, and how it is perceived to matter, is the proper business of the historian.

Note. This is an extended and modified version of a lecture delivered at the British Academy on 9 May 2002. I am grateful to those members of the audience who made comments and urged corrections on that occasion, especially Lord Runciman, Professors David Cannadine, Sir John Elliott, Roy Foster, Peter Marshall, Sir Keith Thomas, and Drs Richard Drayton and Emma Rothschild. I am also grateful to Professor Donald Cameron Watt for his subsequent critique of my views.

[49] P. J. Marshall, 'Imperial Britain', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 23 (1995), 379–94.