The New Imperial History: 
A Pedagogical Approach

Students of British imperial history will, no doubt, be familiar with the notion of the “New Imperial History,” an historiographic tradition that argues for the synergy between Britain’s domestic and imperial histories. As Kathleen Wilson suggests in the introduction to her edited volume *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, the new imperial history “has demonstrated that the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ have been difficult to disentangle since 1492.”¹ To be sure, the new imperial history has its detractors. One is hard-pressed, Bernard Porter has argued, to suggest that empire was a critical aspect of Britain’s domestic historical narrative. The domestic public, he has written, were on the whole “uninterested” in the subject.² Recently published books by Stephen Conway and Brendan Simms similarly challenge the notion (to quote J.R. Seeley) that “the history of England is not in England but in America and Asia.”³ Porter, Conway, and Simms have all, in their own way, argued that Britons and British policy-makers, in particular, were more interested in the European continent than the wider world. New imperial historians, their challenge suggests, have made mountains out of imperial mole-hills.

Criticisms aside, to suggest that the history of domestic Britain and its empire were simultaneous narratives is hardly a revolutionary point. The grammar of the new

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imperial history is pervasive in the modern academy. Domestic British and British imperial histories are, we are told, “always already” the same story. They are “imbricated histories” or “braided narratives.” I do not intend to challenge such statements in this essay. Indeed, I have written, spoken, and thought exactly those statements in my own professional life, counting myself, as I do, a practitioner of the new imperial history. What I would like to do, though, is to use this short essay to reflect on the new imperial history less as a scholarly agenda and a research program and more as a matter of pedagogical praxis. How, I want to ask, ought new imperial historians make use of this historiographic tradition in the undergraduate classroom? What are the costs and the benefits of mobilizing new imperial historiography on syllabi and in classrooms?

Intellectually and ideologically, these questions point at a charged pedagogical choice facing practitioners of the new imperial history and, perhaps, of historians more broadly. On the one hand, it is possible to continue teaching undergraduate British history using the programmatic models and courses that have so attracted students over time. Surely, it remains easy to fill classes with courses on the Tudor and Stuart periods, particularly given Hollywood’s addiction to big and small screen (mis)representations of Henrician England. But, for those of us who research as new imperial historians, such a plan fails to represent the contemporary state of our scholarship; it is hardly a transparent reflection of the intellectual stake we hope to make on British history more broadly. Indeed, for those of us who have embraced the notion that to speak of the British state is simultaneously to speak of its empire, teaching a more traditional pedagogical curriculum serves to conserve the category of the national as central to historical narratives, and, to quote Antoinette Burton, further serves “to reconstitute its centrality” to the historical
narrative in the minds of our students.\textsuperscript{4} A new imperial pedagogy, contrapuntally, has the advantages of 1) reflecting the messy confluence of national and imperial history, 2) mirroring the academic interventions made by new imperial scholarship, 3) destabilizing the nation as a category of historical analysis in favor of a globalized sense of movement, and 4) expanding the scope of a History department’s geographic offerings. On the downside, there are some potentially vexing questions. Will students be drawn to British history if it is imagined through a new imperial lens? More significantly, how do we capture new imperial history in undergraduate syllabi.

As a disclaimer, I should note that most of what I have to say here is predicated on my own, admittedly anecdotal, experience at Skidmore College, a small liberal arts institution of about 2,500 undergraduate students located in Saratoga Springs, New York. I arrived at Skidmore in the Fall of 2005. I held in my hand a newly minted Ph.D. from the University of Southern California (USC), and I was eager to assume my new position as Assistant Professor for British & British Imperial History at the college. I was the second person to hold this title. My predecessor had been at Skidmore for only a handful of years, having replaced a long serving and highly regarded scholar of Tudor and Stuart England. The \textit{British} (if we can call it that) history program at Skidmore was, therefore, heavily inflected by early modern English history when I arrived. It still amuses me that my office window is tattooed with a decal of the Tudor Rose. I have tried to remove it, but it adheres to the window rather tenaciously, acting as a physical reminder of the History Department’s history. The bookshelves in my office are similarly marked by the residue of the department’s Tudor/Stuart past. Etched into the outer edge of the shelves,

one can still see labels like “Tudor,” “Stuart,” “Glorious Revolution,” “Civil War,” “Henrician Reformation” and “Elizabethan England.” It is as if the office speaks to me of the kinds of history that were done in it in years gone by.

When the long-serving Tudor/Stuart historian retired in 2000-2001, the History Department faced a proverbial fork in the road. With only six faculty lines in history, there was serious reason to think that dedicating one entire faculty position to the history of Britain made little sense, either as a matter of historical coverage, departmental resource allocation, or student interest. And yet, there were equally pressing reasons to think that British history was historically significant enough to merit pedagogical coverage in some way. The compromise decision (and I have been assured by some who were there at the time that it was a compromise) was to re-focus the faculty line to be British and British imperial in nature. Such a move, so the thinking ran, allowed for coverage of British history while also allowing for some coverage of the non-European parts of the globe that had, for a time, constituted the British empire. It was a solution that tapped into British history’s global significance as well as allowing a small department to grow its geographic coverage. If the job advertisements listed in publications like the American Historical Association’s Perspectives offer an accurate snapshot of the profession, my colleague’s was not an atypical hiring decision, as academic institutions like Skidmore have frequently sought British historians with a background in Britain’s imperial history over the past decade.

The young scholar hired to fill the spot, my immediate predecessor, worked on the history of empire in Africa, allowing the department to expand its coverage into a continent that had theretofore only been taught as part of the Atlantic slave trade. When I
assumed my position in the Fall of 2005, the department lost that African coverage but supplemented its coverage of Asia, as I was able to offer courses on the British Raj in India. My immediate predecessor’s short tenure at Skidmore had not allowed him the opportunity to re-make the British history program. That task fell to me, and here we come to the core of my point in this essay. What I faced that semester was a question I suspect many face, namely how to deliver the kind of history I had trained in at a large research institution like USC at a smaller teaching institution like Skidmore.

By 2005, USC had six historians working on some aspect of British history. Undergraduates there could take courses on modern British imperial history as well as modern British political history. They could study Henry VIII’s reformation or medieval Irish history. The depth and the breadth of what was possible seemed rather boundless. At USC, then, undergraduates could take classes that looked at Britain’s domestic history and others that looked at its imperial history because six faculty members offered (in some years) as many as twenty-four different British history courses. Students could master the domestic narrative, then study the imperial narrative, and then, if they so chose, work to integrate them into a new imperial narrative either in their upper-division seminars or as graduate students. But, the situation I faced at a small liberal arts college was much different. Indeed, I suspect that the situation I faced at Skidmore was much more like that most newly minted Ph.D.’s find when they hit the teaching market in their first jobs at liberal arts colleges and small universities.

I was the only person in the History Department teaching British history. I could not count on one person to deliver a domestic narrative while I taught an imperial one or complicated the two by fusing them into a singular history. So what to do? On the one
hand, I could press forward with the courses that were already outlined in the college
catalogue. Students filled the seats of courses on Tudor and Stuart England, so there was
no pressing reason to abandon that tried and true tradition, and my teaching need not have
been a reflection of my scholarly life, which could easily have continued in the new
imperial tradition. Or, I could re-make the British history program to reflect shifts and
changes in the scholarly tradition. I could insist on a new imperial program that fused
British and British imperial histories into one.

Some of the problems here were logistical. At Skidmore, I am expected to deliver
five courses a year across two semesters. Like most faculty, I have about six courses
listed in the college catalogue with which to deliver everything I want to teach, and I
have no real way of steering students through a set of courses. There is, then, no
guarantee that a student who took, say, Tudor/Stuart English history with me would then
go on to develop that knowledge with a course on imperial history. As a result, my initial
impulse – to retain some of the national histories and jettison others in favor of imperial
courses – continually struck me as unsatisfactory. Without ever feeling fully comfortable
that a new imperial pedagogy could or would work in isolation, therefore, I decided I
simply had to make a leap of faith and develop a curriculum that focused on the imperial
history of movement between empire and nation rather than privileging either category
over the other.

My plan required first that I erase pre-existing introductory surveys of British
history, two courses that had moved from roughly 1450 to the present and which divided
that period at 1688. In their place, I created a survey of British imperial history that
begins in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales and then moves around the imperial globe. This
shift marginalized the nation as an initial category for student engagement.\(^5\) Gone was a potentially Whiggish narrative that favored the developmental progress of the British state and its gradual expansion into the wider world. In its place emerged a wide-ranging survey that accepted imperial relationships as the core analytical category for both the domestic and the global history at work in the British Isles from the fifteenth century forward.

At the intermediary level, I replaced courses that focused on the pivotal moments of Tudor/Stuart history (the Reformation, Elizabethan England, the Civil War, and the Glorious Revolution), with a new two-part survey of domestic British history. These two classes, now broken at 1707 (the year of the Act of Union between England and Scotland rather than at the Glorious Revolution of 1688), re-focus attention on the national history at play in the British Isles, but they do so with a careful eye to that history’s global contexts. As I have noted, there is no way I can guarantee that a student in my mid-level courses has taken my introductory class, so I still have to insist that students take care not to pre-suppose the nation as we study events like the unification of England and Wales under Henry VIII or the unification of Britain or the United Kingdom under Queen Anne or King George III respectively, and global/imperial connections are central here.\(^6\) What

\(^5\) While not often an advocate for textbooks, I have found that this course only functions with one because of the scope of what is being covered. The best textbook I have found is Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (New York: Longman, 2009). Levine is a practitioner in the new imperial tradition, so it is perhaps not surprising that he textbook would engage the history of empire as also always a history of the British nation.

were Scotland’s goals as an independent imperial power in the decades before the 1707 Act of Union? What was Ireland’s response to the American War and how did that history influence the decision to pull Ireland into the United Kingdom in 1801? Questions like these re-center British national history as imperial narratives, typically inspiring students to awe at the realization that the British empire can reasonably be said to have existed before Britain forged itself as a nation-state.

My senior division courses, then, take up specific themes and develop them more deeply. I have a course that looks specifically at the history of the Raj in India, as well as another that looks at the synergies between the legal history of the British nation and the British empire.7 Another seminar I have taught attempts a look at the way the British industrial revolution played out globally, and, as my own scholarship expands into the Pacific, I am able to contemplate correlative courses on the colonization of Australia and/or the Enlightenment culture of Pacific exploration.

As expected, teaching the new imperial history as an undergraduate pedagogical program has had its costs and its benefits. Despite some initial resistance (and some minor continuing complaints) from students who want a history that expands upon the Tudor/Stuart stories that have so fascinated us on television and the silver screen, students have, on the whole, been receptive to the idea that domestic and global histories work together. I have found a surprising pocket of interest among students who hope to go on to work in global business, as these students are particularly interested in history

7 The field of imperial legal history has recently seen the publication of a number of interesting books including: Elizabeth Kolsky, Colonial Justice in British India: Violence and the Rule of Law (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Martin J. Wiener, An Empire on Trial: Race, Murder, and Justice under British Rule, 1870-1935 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
that extends beyond national boundaries and narratives that deconstruct the nation as a central category for global organization. No institution gets at this point more poignantly than does the East India Company, which I suspect is why so many business majors flock to my courses on British India.\footnote{Philip Stern’s new book on the East India Company in the seventeenth century merits particular mention here. See Philip J. Stern, \textit{The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).}

There are downsides to teaching the new imperial history. Some students have suggested that the imbrication of domestic and imperial history would be difficult enough if they already knew the two distinct stories. Here, though, I have stood my ground on the new imperial history’s insistence that any distinction between the domestic and the imperial is an historical fiction in the first place, and some of my strongest students have, happily, taken that line of thinking and run with it – some directly to top-tier graduate schools. A more significant problem has been the question of voice. In an effort to tell British history as a matter of global interactions, the voices of domestic Britain that would have been so clear in a different pedagogical model, are diluted.

This problem became most clear to me when an international student – from London, no less – took several of my classes and noted that in allowing Indians, Native Americans, Australians, Canadians, etc. to narrate British history, the only voices missing were those voices once labeled as voices from “the center.” To be clear, the complaint here was not, I think, conservative reaction to an intercultural way of doing British history. It was, rather, a critical appraisal of new imperial pedagogy and, perhaps, of new imperial history as a model. We do well to recall that, though the nation need not be the central category of historical analysis in British history, it was an important concept, one that still merits some (even if not central or primary) attention.
New imperial history can, then, work as a pedagogical model. Indeed, I imagine it works well in big departments at large institutions with multiple British historians. But, it can also work well in smaller institutions with limited faculty resources. It can be implemented in places where it is the singular approach to undergraduate teaching about Britain. New imperial pedagogy exposes students to some of the most vital academic work on British history available today, it demands that students step outside categories like national history that may feel comfortable to them to engage with transnational histories that will, no doubt, serve them better in the contemporary world of global workforces and multinational corporations.

At an institutional level, British historians who teach new imperial history can expand the geographic coverage of History Departments that are smaller than might be ideal, and they generate geographic and disciplinary cooperation because of the transnational nature of their work. And professionally, academic historians who teach and practice the new imperial history will find themselves working in a world where their scholarship and their teaching harmonize with one another. If those of us whose academic careers are spent researching and writing in the new imperial tradition continue to teach to our students historical narratives that we challenge in our scholarly work, we will forever face a world that normalizes categories that we reject and misunderstands the historical relationships we are trying to unearth. Teaching the new imperial history serves as a practical commitment to the old adage that the life of scholarly research and the practice of teaching are mutually informing activities or, to put things more metaphorically, teaching the new imperial history allows historians to put their pedagogical money where their professional mouth is.
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