Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion

IMPERIALISM may be defined as the sustained effort to assimilate a country or region to the political, economic or cultural system of another power. 'Formal' imperialism aimed to achieve this object by the explicit transfer of sovereignty and, usually, the imposition of direct administrative control. Its 'informal' counterpart relied upon the links created by trade, investment or diplomacy, often supplemented by unequal treaties and periodic armed intervention, to draw new regions into the world-system of an imperial power. Quite small powers could and did enter this game and it could be played in any geographical setting. But its complex characteristics were most clearly visible in the expansion of strong Western states into the extra-European periphery. No other power developed more varied and far-reaching imperial relationships than Victorian Britain.

The futility of trying to make sense of Victorian expansion in terms of territorial or formal empire alone has long been recognised. But the central problem of Victorian imperialism remains how to explain why informal imperialism became the vehicle of expansion where it did; why formal empire was extended in some regions but not others; and why only some zones of informal imperialism were later absorbed into the formal empire. In short, how should we explain the peculiar configuration of the world-system bequeathed by the Victorians? Should we treat it as a finished artefact, economically and strategically functional, or as the inchoate, unfinished handiwork of drift and opportunism? Did the strange course of Victorian imperialism derive mainly from the logic of the policy-makers or was it really the outcome of a decentralized and pluralistic political system only occasionally capable of imposing discipline and direction on its external activity?

The best approach to these issues is still to be found in the powerful hypothesis set out by Gallagher and Robinson over forty years ago. The 'imperialism of free trade' stressed above all the relentless expansionism of Victorian Britain and insisted that the choice of mode was a purely tactical consideration shaped by circumstance.[1] Subsequently, the force of their original insight was widely diffused across the study of Victorian imperialism by a corps of 'new believers'. As is not unusual, the converts were inclined to embrace some aspects of the new doctrine and to deprecate others, but it is possible to discern in their substantial body of writing the elements of a powerful and seductive model. Radically

1. J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', Econ[omic] Hist[ory] Rev[iew], vi (1953).

simplified, this model rests upon five propositions. The first insists that informal empire was the favoured means of mid-Victorian expansion, preferred by governments on grounds of cost and convenience.[1] The second that 'informality' was typically abandoned for direct intervention or annexation only when 'national' (as opposed to private) interests were at stake.[2] The third that the occasion for intervention or annexation was usually found in the political consequences of socio-economic change at the periphery – with a fusillade of 'local crises' exploding into a 'general crisis' of Europe's relations with Afro-Asia after 1880.[3] The fourth that deciding on the scale of political intervention, including the switch from informal to formal empire, was normally the prerogative of the 'official mind', an organism largely free from undue external influence and guided by its own memories, traditions and values.[4] Last, that the overall pattern of formal expansion was heavily influenced by the exceptional importance attached to British supremacy on the Indian sub-continent.[5] Implied in the model was the view that the hyperactive formal empire-building after 1880 was reactive or defensive: designed to protect old zones of influence rather than to seek out new ones. It was symptomatic of growing weakness and decline, of a struggle to 'stabilize' Britain's place in the extra-European world against the intrusion of other powers.[6] From that it was a short step to portray post-Victorian Britain as a *status quo* power. The dynamic of her expansion had run its course; the highest stage of British imperialism had been reached; decadence lay in wait.

For all its appeal, this version has not lacked critics. In recent years the most formidable assault has been that of Cain and Hopkins. They argued that Robinson and Gallagher and their followers had misunderstood the nature of the 'official mind', misdated the decisive phase of Victorian expansion and mistaken the real causes of the 'new imperialism' after 1880.[7] The 'official mind' was really the mouthpiece of 'gentlemanly capitalism' – an essentially commercial (rather than indus-

1. See e.g. B. Porter, *The Lion's Share* (London, 1975), p. 27; id., *Britain, Europe and the World* (London, 1983), p. 30; R. Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century* (London, 1976), p. 63; D. K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire, 1830–1914* (London, 1973), p. 62; M. E. Chamberlain, *Pax Britannica? British Foreign Policy, 1789–1914* (London, 1988), p. 125.

2. Porter, *Lion's Share*, pp. 113, 17–51; Fieldhouse, *Economics*, p. 65.

3. Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century*, p. 104; Fieldhouse, *Economics*, p. 63; Porter, *Lion's Share*, p. 28.

4. For the original concept, R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians* (London, 1961), ch. 1. For foreign policy-making as 'largely' unaccountable, Porter, *Britain*, p. 9. For a more or less enthusiastic endorsement of the 'official mind', P. M. Kennedy, 'Continuity and Discontinuity in British Imperialism', in *British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. C. C. Eldridge (London, 1984) p. 27; Kennedy, *The Realities behind Diplomacy* (London, 1981), pp. 59–65.

5. For the diffusion of this view, D. Southgate, 'Imperial Britain' in *Britain Pre-eminent*, ed. C. J. Bartlett (London, 1969), pp. 155–7; Fieldhouse, *Economics*, p. 465; Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century*, p. 66; P. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* (London, 1980), p. 411.

6. Fieldhouse, *Economics*, p. 7; Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century*, p. 109; Porter, *Lion's Share*, p. 118; id., *Britain*, pp. 42, 58; Kennedy, 'Continuity', p. 38; Chamberlain, *Pax Britannica*, p. 126 f.

7. P. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (London, 1993), pp. 8–10.

trial) ethos infused with the gentlemanly values of a rentier class resident (chiefly) in southern England.[1] There was no conflict between the outlook of Whitehall and that of the City – its counterpart at the other end of the Strand. It was wrong to see late Victorian imperialism as the gloomy epilogue to the mid-Victorian age of confidence: in reality it was the vehicle of a commercial and financial expansion which continued far into the twentieth century.[2] Nor should the causes of late Victorian intervention and annexation be sought in the 'local crises' of the periphery since these were merely symptomatic of the quickening pulse of British commercial enterprise and the energy of the gentlemen capitalists.[3]

This was a bold attempt to replace what might be regarded as the less robust elements of the older model: the uncertain provenance and mysterious workings of the 'official mind'; the paradox that the profligate expansion of the late nineteenth century was strategically defensive and economically sterile; the *apparent* stress laid upon the decisive influence of periphery conditions.[4] Indeed, their insistence upon the commercial vigour of late Victorian Britain and the continued assertiveness of British world power was a welcome corrective to exaggerated rumours of imperial decline. On other fronts, however, this revisionist advance ran into heavy fire, much of it directed at its claims for the political pre-eminence of gentlemanly capitalism.[5] Other critics stressed the diversity of interests behind British expansion and challenged the evidential basis for the primacy Cain and Hopkins had given to financial and commercial considerations in British policy especially in Egypt and South Africa.[6] In their own account of the partition of tropical Africa (the wind-tunnel in which new models of British imperialism are invariably tested) Cain and Hopkins seemed uncertain how far British intervention was driven by decision-makers at home, by a new breed of 'mega-merchants' on the spot, by pressure groups appealing to the 'national interest' or by the sub-imperialism of pocket proconsuls like Portal.[7] Nor does their model throw new light on the aspect of Victorian imperialism to which Robinson and Gallagher had given great emphasis: its bifurcation into the formal and informal modes. On that issue, at least, the new historiography followed the old.[8]

1. Ibid., pp. 45–6.
2. Ibid., pp. 471–3.
3. Ibid., p. 395.
4. In fact Robinson and Gallagher's model of British imperialism rejects explicit reliance on peripheral factors as the prime cause of expansion.
5. M. J. Daunton, '"Gentlemanly Capitalism" and British Industry, 1820–1914', *Past and Present*, cxxii (1989), 149, 153, 157; G. Ingham, 'British Capitalism: Empire, Merchants and Decline', *Social History*, xx (1995), 342, 346.
6. A. N. Porter, '"Gentlemanly Capitalism" and Empire: The British Experience since 1750?', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, xviii (1990), 265–95.
7. Cain and Hopkins, *Imperialism*, pp. 356, 382, 386, 390–91.
8. Ibid., p. 312; Ingham, 'British Capitalism', p. 345.

In this article it is argued that it is precisely in the Victorians' choice of expansive techniques that we can find the best clue to the wider character of their imperialism. Any reappraisal ought to be informed by the pluralism of British society (on which recent work has laid such stress); by the diversity of British interests at work in the periphery (on which a large literature now exists); and by careful attention to the international constraints which shaped mid- as well as late Victorian expansion. On all these grounds, it will be suggested, existing models do insufficient justice to the contingency of Victorian empire-making. But the starting point must be another look at the canny notions riveted into that historiographical dreadnought, the imperialism of free trade.

As Gallagher and Robinson rightly insisted, it was the energy of private British interests – settler, commercial, missionary among others – which supplied much of the dynamic behind Victorian expansion. It was their attempts to 'convert' independent regions of the extra-European periphery into an extension of Victorian Britain which constituted 'informal empire', a term whose utility has made it indispensable. But was informal imperialism the consistent preference of Victorian governments or merely tacit recognition of the limits of British power?

There can be no doubt that Victorian governments sought constantly to exert influence in the extra-European world. This was true of many regions where the possibility – let alone the desirability – of establishing formal empire was remote. But 'informal empire' embraces a very wide range of semi-colonial relationships and at least two very different models of it can be discerned. In the 'western' model, British influence worked almost entirely through private interests and enterprise, with at best spasmodic intervention by diplomats and cruisers. This was the Latin American version. But in the eastern world from Turkey to Japan it was notably more formal, operating within a framework of extra-territorial privilege seen at its most elaborate in the tariff regime, treaty ports, concessions, bases, garrisons and gunboats of maritime China.[1] Informal empire was a commercial-diplomatic regime fashioned to the circumstances of a particular region, not a portmanteau policy to be applied willy-nilly. More than that, there are good grounds for arguing that it represented the maximum influence that Victorian governments *could* exert in the classic arenas of informality, rather than the most they wanted to.

In Argentina and Peru, for example, the evidence suggests that the scope for British governments to intervene more systematically than they did, and the prospect of converting the British commercial presence into something more formal, were both negligible. Vigorous British diplomatic pressure for free trade policies in Peru in the 1840s

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1. J. Osterhammel, 'Semi-colonialism and Informal Empire in China: Towards a Framework of Analysis', in *Imperialism and After*, ed. W. Mommsen and J. Osterhammel (London, 1986). The classic account is J. K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast, 1842–60* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953).

achieved nothing: the state structure was too strong and local politics too violent for overt intervention to be other than counter-productive. When Peru did adopt free trade to escape domestic fiscal crisis, it preserved a state monopoly over its staple export, guano, despite British, French and American opposition.[1] In La Plata, British sea power could intervene to prevent Argentinian domination of Uruguay. But the British community in Argentina itself was much too weak and vulnerable to apply pressure on the Rosas regime with its formidable terror apparatus; naval blockade merely revealed the impracticability of external coercion.[2] Likewise, in Brazil sea power could force abandonment of the slave trade, but it could not prevent the enactment of a tariff in 1844 or give effect to British pressure for a new Anglo-Brazilian commercial treaty.[3] Amid all its other commitments, no British government could have contemplated diverting the military force needed to occupy or annex a Latin American state.

In China, British policy displayed a similar blend of opportunism and timidity. Palmerston's intervention in 1839 was not the result of matured policy but a hasty response to the threatened destruction of British trade at Canton.[4] The treaty port system established in 1842 had few marks of permanence.[5] The interventionist impulse amongst British officials and merchants on the spot was strong.[6] 'It is no unusual characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race', wrote Sir John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong and the senior British official on the China coast, to Clarendon, 'that they begin by trading and end in governing ... I often have misgivings lest the future should re-tell the tale of British India over a vaster field, on a grander scale and with larger interests

1. P. Gootenberg, *Between Silver and Guano: Commercial Policy and the State in Postindependence Peru* (Princeton, 1989), pp. 82–3.

2. H. S. Ferns, *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960), ch. ix; P. Winn, 'British Informal Empire in Uruguay in the Nineteenth Century' *Past and Present*, lxxiii (1976), pp. 106–7; J. Lynch, *Caudillos in Spanish America, 1800–1850* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 264 f.; A. Graham-Yooll, *The Forgotten Colony: A History of the English-speaking Communities in Argentina* (London, 1981). For a recent survey of the role and influence of British merchants in Latin America before 1870, see R. Miller, *Britain and Latin America in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1993), pp. 78–88.

3. L. Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1970); R. Graham, *Britain and the Onset of Modernization in Brazil* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 107–8. For an appraisal stressing the ill-coordinated character and uneven results of British intervention in Latin America before 1870, Miller, *Latin America*, pp. 48–59.

4. M. Collis, *Foreign Mud* (London, 1946), pp. 265–85; G. S. Graham, *The China Station: War and Diplomacy, 1830–60* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 71–101. Sir James Graham was able to show, in the Commons debate on the China war in April 1840, that despite a recommendation by the Duke of Wellington in 1835, no naval presence was established off Canton until September 1839: *Hansard*, 3rd ser., liii (7 April 1840) cols. 696–703. For the view that recourse to war was the Cabinet's only escape from meeting the £2 million indemnity promised to British traders who had had opium confiscated, P. W. Fay, *The Opium War, 1840–42* (Chapel Hill, 1975), pp. 193–4.

5. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy*, pp. 156 ff.

6. For Consul Alcock's enthusiasm for intervention in the Taiping rebellion to extract concessions from Peking, S. Y. Teng, *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers* (Oxford, 1971), p. 208.

involved'.[1] In March 1856, Clarendon himself asked Bowring about the possibility of a British 'undertaking for the protection of the Chinese Empire' and how 'such a Protectorate could be established and made effectual'.[2] Having deftly inflated the *Arrow* incident into a *casus belli*, Bowring did his best to fulfil his own predictions by arguing vehemently for the complete expulsion of Manchu authority from Canton.[3] But during the 1850s, when friction between the British and Chinese authorities was at its height, the demands of the Crimean war and the Indian Mutiny restricted British military power and enforced close co-operation with other European powers,[4] especially since the Russians remained ostentatiously neutral during the second Opium War.[5] After 1860, the advance of Russian power in the north and the entrenchment of French and American influence alongside British in the Chinese treaty system ruled out unilateral action against the recalcitrant Manchu leviathan. As Disraeli remarked, the presence of other Western powers in East Asia meant that 'a system of political compromise has developed itself like the balance of power in Europe'.[6] The British had to be careful not to come into conflict with powers of comparable strength which might combine with China or with each other against them. Informal empire *faute de mieux* had become the leitmotif of their policy. Manchu recovery after 1860, and fears that opinion at home would not tolerate another war in China, also helped to entrench the 'cooperative policy' against merchant criticism.

Informal imperialism was thus not a policy nor even a recognized formula for the assertion of influence. It represented a pragmatic acceptance of limited power. Far from being the best of all possible imperial worlds, informal empire could be a tense and unstable relationship whose purpose was the often painful and sometimes violent transformation of an 'undeveloped' economy and its socio-political institutions. It is easy to exaggerate the smoothness of collaboration: the instinct of private British interests was to force the pace towards political and economic change where they could, where they dared and where they commanded the support of the imperial centre. In favourable circumstances foreign traders, evangelists or land speculators could destabilize an extra-European polity extremely quickly. Once a cycle of persistent instability was set in motion, the probability of foreign intervention and then annexation became greater and greater. Where this corrosive pro-

1. Bowring to Clarendon, 5 June 1854: W. C. Costin, *Great Britain and China, 1833–1860* (Oxford, 1937), p. 183.

2. Clarendon to Bowring, 7 Mar. 1856: ibid., p. 197.

3. Bowring to Clarendon, 28 Jan., 10 Mar., 9 April 1858: Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Clarendon dep c. 85.

4. Elgin (Singapore) to Clarendon, 29 July 1857: D. Bonner-Smith and E. W. R. Lumby, *The Second China War* (Navy Records Soc., London, 1954), p. 218; Costin, *Great Britain and China*, pp. 186, 194, 236.

5. See J. Evans, *The Russo-Chinese Crisis: N. P. Ignatiev's Mission to Peking 1859–60* (Newtonville, Mass., 1987), p. 15.

6. Costin, *Great Britain and China*, p. 228.

cess was held in check and empire remained at best informal, it was usually the residual strength of the host state and the geopolitical constraints on British action that were the main causes. What is much less clear is that British governments themselves had any consistent criteria by which they judged whether informal influence was working satisfactorily. It seems wiser to conclude that their failure to intervene more forcefully than they did in any particular setting was more likely to reflect doubts about the efficacy of action than confidence in masterly (informal) inactivity.

If informal empire was more likely to reflect the *force majeure* of circumstance than the triumph of a principle, is it possible to see any consistency in the mid-Victorians' recourse to formal empire? Was annexation really a 'last resort'? The examples below suggest little firmness of imperial purpose. The Colonial Office had vehemently opposed the annexation of New Zealand throughout the 1830s. Even after Lord Melbourne reached a pragmatic accommodation with the powerful New Zealand Company lobby,[1] it clung to a scheme for selective annexation of certain districts – a policy abandoned as impractical in mid-1839.[2] In South Africa such vacillation became habitual. In 1836, D'Urban's precipitate annexation of Queen Adelaide's Land had been bluntly disavowed by the home government.[3] In 1844, London had annexed Natal. Three years later, the Colonial Secretary sanctioned the revival of D'Urban's scheme and allowed Sir Harry Smith to annex British Kaffraria.[4] In 1848, Smith extended British rule to embrace the Boers beyond the Orange. But before long, as Boer resistance grew and the disasters of the Eighth Kaffir War discredited Smith's frontier policy, London disengaged from the interior under the 'conventions' policy of 1852–4 promising the Boers of the Free State and the Transvaal their independence. But far from relying thereafter on a new policy of informal influence, successive colonial secretaries encouraged the Cape governors to expand the eastern frontier and pursue sub-continental federation.[5] They should not be deterred from necessary extensions of British territory, remarked Newcastle in 1861.[6] The creation of independent Boer states, grumbled a senior official, had been a 'wonderfully anomalous measure ... It will deserve mature consideration whether the governor should not be encouraged to take advantage of any fair opening ... for once more bringing them within the control of the only

1. W. P. Morrell, *British Colonial Policy in the Age of Peel and Russell* (Oxford, 1930), ch. v; P. Adams, *Fatal Necessity* (Auckland, 1977), pp. 92–155.

2. Adams, *Fatal Necessity*, pp. 169–70.

3. A new border, D'Urban had told Aberdeen in a classic expression of proconsular sub-imperialism, would 'provide security for the future and a just indemnification for the past' as well as allowing a reduction of the garrison: *Documents Relating to the Kaffir War of 1835*, ed. G. M. Theal (London, 1912), pp. 218–24.

4. For Smith's policy, see J. S. Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire* (Berkeley, 1963), pp. 222–60.

5. W. P. Morrell, *British Colonial Policy in the Mid-Victorian Age* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 18–22.

6. Minute of 22 April 1861: C. W. De Kiewiet, *British Colonial Policy and the South African Republics* (London, 1929), p. 146.

responsible and civilised Government in South Africa'.[1] In the next decade, Carnarvon was to seize just such a 'fair opening' and annex the Transvaal, a policy which culminated in the fiasco of Majuba and a second (temporary) withdrawal from the interior.[2]

These examples could be multiplied in every quarter of the globe. The Colonial Office delegated the administration of the Gold Coast settlements to a Committee of Merchants in 1828, but after parliamentary pressure, resumed direct control in 1842.[3] In the later 1840s, the Colonial Secretary first of all forbade and then sanctioned the extension of British jurisdiction.[4] In the later 1850s, two colonial secretaries pondered inconclusively the merits of a complete withdrawal.[5] London supplied Queen's troops to punish an Ashanti invasion in 1863 but soon regretted the financial loss and military failure that followed. Parliamentary castigation led to the Select Committee of 1865 and a new policy of strict non-intervention beyond the limits of British control. But by 1873 it was recognised even in the Colonial Office that non-intervention had broken down.[6] The Ashanti war of 1874 marked a further round in the seemingly endless cycle of grudging advance and disillusioned retreat. In Central America the 1830s saw the assertion of British control over the Bay Islands while a *de facto* protectorate (formalized in 1845) was established over the 'Mosquito Shore' in 1841–2.[7] In 1848 Palmerston extended the southern boundary of the latter, perhaps to control the likeliest site of an isthmian canal.[8] But two years later, the Clayton-Bulwer agreement marked the onset of a Central American retreat. By 1860 London had summarily abandoned both the Bay Islands (ceded to Honduras) and the Mosquito Protectorate.[9] In south-east Asia, James Brooke, the would-be Cecil Rhodes of the archipelago, won over the Foreign Office to a forward policy in 1848, in a period of Anglo-Dutch friction. By 1852 he had been dismissed as governor of Labuan and his expansionism disavowed.[10]

It might be argued that frequent oscillation between different forms of expansion was the hallmark of flexible imperial thinking. In fact, these episodes suggest that, far from being guided by straightforward criteria as to where and when formal or informal modes of expansion

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1. Minute by T. F. Elliott, 17 Aug. 1865: Morrell, *Mid-Victorian Policy*, pp. 28–9.

2. C. W. De Kiewiet, *The Imperial Factor in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1937), chs. iv, v.

3. Significantly, because of fears that slave trading had revived. For the select committee report, see *Great Britain and Ghana: Documents of Ghana History, 1807–1957*, ed. G. E. Metcalfe (repr. London, 1994), pp. 171–83.

4. Ibid., pp. 205–8.

5. Ibid., pp. 276–7.

6. Ibid., pp. 310–11, 330, 352–3, 364–7. The acquisition of the Dutch forts in 1872, pointed out a Colonial Office memo, had violated the select committee's resolutions of 1865: ibid., p. 363.

7. M. W. Williams, *Anglo-American Isthmian Diplomacy* (London, 1916), pp. 41–2; R. W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Oxford, 1960), p. 158.

8. W. D. Jones, *The American Problem in British Diplomacy, 1841–61* (London, 1974), pp. 70–3.

9. Ibid., pp. 84–5.

10. N. Tarling, *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, 1824–71* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969), pp. 200–4.

were required, British policy was experimental and opportunistic to a degree. But they also suggest that neither the coherence nor the ubiquitous influence of an 'official mind' should be taken for granted.

The 'local habitation' of the official mind was to be found in Whitehall, but its real field of operations lay in those diplomatic-strategic spheres where official control was greatest. In imperial terms that chiefly meant the Mediterranean and Near East. Since the seventeenth century, Britain's influence in the Mediterranean had been vital to her claim to great power status in Europe. By 1800, fears that French or Russian domination of the Near East would threaten British supremacy in India had extended this diplomatic interest into a vast new security zone stretching from Gibraltar to the eastern borders of Persia. Here two powerful strategic complexes, one British, the other Anglo-Indian, combined, not always harmoniously, to form the strongest official 'interest' in the British world-system. Beyond this great strategic corridor, official influence grew weaker and official concepts more protean. Even within it, strategic aims and methods could sometimes veer unpredictably, while in the Persian Gulf the pace was set not in London or Calcutta but by the maritime sub-imperialism of the Bombay government.[1]

Plainly, British world policy was informed by certain rooted conceptions of national interest which transcended party. Britain's status as a great power was axiomatic and few denied that its corollary was the balance of power in Europe.[2] The spread of British commercial activity was regarded as not only desirable in itself but as a beneficent, civilizing agency. From the 1840s at the latest, the universal virtues of free trade entered the canon.[3] Colonization of new lands by British migrants enjoyed similar broad support.[4] With the advent of Gladstonian finance in the 1850s, the parsimony already characteristic of a property owners' parliament was reinforced by a powerful new dogma about the need to drive down the costs of government.[5]

But the circumstances and pressures which buffeted decision-makers made it very difficult to translate these broad desiderata into any consistent set of diplomatic or imperial principles, let alone practice. Up to the 1860s and beyond, the volcanic force of anti-slavery ideology swept

1. J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795–1880* (Oxford, 1968), chs. xii, xiv.

2. C. K. Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Palmerston* (London, 1951), ii. 792, for Palmerston's views. For a more critical view of British thinking, see P. W. Schroeder, *Austria, Great Britain and the Crimean War* (Ithaca, 1972), pp. 400–22.

3. For a recent discussion of the debate on free trade, see A. C. Howe, 'Free Trade and the City of London, c. 1820–1870', *History*, lxxvii (1992).

4. P. Knaplund, *Gladstone and Britain's Imperial Policy* (London, 1927), pp. 58, 61, 82, 93. 'The great interest and purpose of England', declared Gladstone in 1852, 'was the multiplication of her race ...' *Hansard*, 3rd ser., cxxi, col. 956. For Cardwell's views, ibid., clxix, cols. 911–14 (26 May 1865).

5. E. F. Biaggini, 'Popular Liberals, Gladstonian Finance and the Debate on Taxation, 1860–74', in *Currents of Radicalism*, ed. E. F. Biaggini and A. J. Reid (Cambridge, 1991); F. W. Hirst, *Gladstone as Financier and Economist* (London, 1931), pp. 147–8, 178; P. R. Ghosh, 'Disraelian Conservatism: A Financial Approach', *ante*, xcix (1984), 268–96.

ministers and officials willy-nilly into new commitments: in West
Africa, Brazil and the Atlantic.[1] During the prolonged crisis on the river
Plate from 1842 to 1846, the lobbying of commercial interests first for
and then against intervention exerted a decisive influence on British
policy.[2] In the 1830s and 1870s, merchant lobbying deflected British
policy in China.[3] As Palmerston shrewdly grasped, foreign policy could
easily be derailed by a press campaign or an appeal to patriotic preju-
dices. Victorian ministers, though not Palmerston, frequently be-
moaned the unpredictable shifts and swings of public opinion which
beat upon them through the 'echo chamber' of the House of Commons
with its 'crowd psychology'.[4] Under the British system, no minister
could survive against an unfriendly Commons, and political expediency
usually trumped loftier official calculations. 'Whatever may be the
policy of this or any government', remarked a junior minister in 1873,
'*Public Opinion* will not permit the withdrawal of British authority
from the W. Coast of Africa'.[5] Parliamentary zeal for the integrity of
British possessions, warned Derby in 1874, ruled out any West African
accommodation with France that involved giving up even tiny Gambia.[6]
'A pacific and commercial policy is up to a point very wise', Salisbury
told Lord Randolph Churchill in 1886, 'but ... there is a point beyond
which it is not wise either in a patriotic or a party sense – and the
question is – where shall we draw the line ...?'[7] Trapped between the
fickleness of domestic opinion and the wilfulness of proconsuls, sol-
diers, settlers and humanitarians, ministers often lapsed into fatalism.
Melbourne bewailed the 'necessity by which a nation that once begins to
colonize is led step by step over the whole globe'.[8] Governments at
home, thought Henry Taylor in the Colonial Office, were simply too
weak to control the colonies.[9] 'Events [in South Africa] are taking much
the same course as during the last century in India', minuted the Duke of
Newcastle in 1861,' and though we may deprecate them, the question is
– are they within our power? I think we may control them but ... we

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1. Bethell, *Brazilian Slave Trade* ch. 11 (despite growing opposition in Britain to coercive measures).
For the annexation of Lagos, see Rogers to Woodhouse, 19 June 1861, in *British Policy towards West
Africa: Select Documents, 1786–1874*, ed. C. W. Newbury (Oxford, 1965), p. 428.

2. Ferns, *Britain and Argentina*, ch. ix.

3. M. Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China* (Cambridge, 1951); N. A. Pelcovits, *The
Old China Hands and the Foreign Office* (New York, 1948), pp. 73–83; M. C. Wright, *The Last Stand
of Chinese Conservatism* (Stanford, 1957), p. 291.

4. T. P. O'Connor's phrase: W. C. Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis*
(Oxford, 1988), pp. 326–7.

5. E. H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, minute of 23 Feb. 1873: Newbury, *West Africa*, p. 455.

6. M. Swartz, *The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Age of Disraeli and Gladstone* (London, 1983),
p. 13.

7. Salisbury to Lord Randolph Churchill, 1 Oct 1886: K. Wilson, 'Drawing the Line at Constanti-
nople', in *British Foreign Secretaries and British Foreign Policy from the Crimean War to the First World
War*, ed. K. Wilson (London, 1987), p. 202.

8. Melbourne to Howick, 16 Dec. 1837: Adams, *Fatal Necessity*, p. 101.

9. Morrell, *Mid-Victorian Colonial Policy*, p. 27.

cannot prevent them'.[1] Fifty years later a most unfatalistic under-secretary complained (of Nigeria) 'we are simply drifting along upon the current of military enterprise and administrative ambition'.[2] His chief remarked with ex-viceregal insouciance: 'It is sometimes but not often possible to decline responsibilities in a hinterland.'[3]

The rough conditions of a decentralized parliamentary imperial state were hardly favourable to the authority, or even the coherence, of an official mind. Convinced as they doubtless were that they understood best the ends and means of policy, ministers and officials were rarely free to impose their departmental view even when they had one. Wherever policy threatened commercial interests, a powerful lobby, settler preten-sions or a proconsul's plans, it was vulnerable to reversal. The policy-makers' prohibitions on expansion or expense, and their periodic re-hearsals of the non-acquisitive character of British policy should be read not as a confident exposition of the guiding principles of imperial thinking but as a symptom of their unremitting struggle to retain some official control over the centrifugal forces that drove Victorian expan-sion, lest their unruly progress should disrupt the financial, military and political institutions of the metropole itself.

Ironically, the colony which the official mind in London found hardest to control is usually seen as the *ultima ratio* of British world policy outside Europe. The primacy of India in imperial thinking has become a cliche in which 'India' is the key to the problem of Britain's late nineteenth-century expansion east and south of Suez, a code which reveals the meaning of so many inexplicable acquisitions. But India's astonishing rise to become the second pole of British world power is part of the puzzle of mid-Victorian imperialism, not an explanation of it. How indeed had British India come to bulk so large in the Victorian world-system? Why had London permitted – or acquiesced in – the colossal enlargement of Company rule before 1857, at a time when little or no strategic benefit and comparatively modest commercial advan-tages could be looked for there? Why had the Indian raj been allowed to grow while Harry Smith's Cape raj had been strangled at birth? Why had Anglo-Indian sub-imperialism in the eastern hemisphere proved so much more successful than British-American in the western?[4] Why had the British in India gained control of a sub-continent when the British in China remained bound to their bunds and trapped in their treaty ports,

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1. Minute of 22 April 1861: De Kiewiet, *British Colonial Policy*, p. 146.
2. Minutes by Winston Churchill, 17, 19 May 1906: R. Hyam, *Elgin and Churchill at the Colonial Office* (London, 1969), p. 199.
3. Elgin's minute of 28 Feb. 1906: ibid.
4. For the travails of Montreal-based mercantile sub-imperialism, see D. G. Creighton, *The Com-mercial Empire of the St Lawrence* (Toronto, 1937); for the Hudson Bay's Company and the Pacific coast, J. S. Galbraith, *The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor* (Berkeley, 1957), pp. 79, 92, 122, 218–19, 232.

condemned to languish in a bastard form of informal empire?[1] The Indian raj may have been, as is often said, a colony *sui generis*, but its exceptional dynamism casts a revealing light on the more stunted growth of territorial expansion elsewhere in Afro-Asia. In fact, India should offer a perfect case-study of the expansive processes by which the size and shape of the Victorian empire was determined.

Certainly, the causes of British Indian aggrandisement had little to do with the policy-makers in London whose instinct had been to check Anglo-Indian ambition at every turn. One governor-general, Ellenborough, was dismissed,[2] another (Amherst) narrowly escaped dismissal,[3] for annexationism. The absorption of Sind and the Punjab were *faits accomplis* perpetrated against London's wishes.[4] It was not until the 1850s, by which time the age of annexation was almost over, that the opening of the Indian hinterland by state-guaranteed railway construction offered major benefits to British trade.[5] The decisive causes of British expansion in India were to be found not in urgings from home but in the uniquely favourable environment in which Anglo-Indian sub-imperialism took root. One domestic circumstance was perhaps contributory. The two thousand proprietors holding East India stock and heavily represented in Parliament before 1832[6] were a bulwark against over-zealous interference by the home government. The 'double government' which shared ultimate control over Indian affairs between the Company and the Board of Control until 1858 allowed the governor-general to play off one branch of the home authorities against the other. Without the added security of the double-government, argued John Malcolm in 1826, India would be merely a pawn in the party games of ministers and 'that great country might be treated as a colony without having those defences against misgovernment which colonies ... possess'.[7] But this was essentially permissive. The motives for territorial expansion in India were not dissimilar from those animating settler or proconsular imperialism elsewhere: the desire of private interests to enlarge the political influence indispensable to commercial profit;[8] the search for defensible and economical frontiers;[9] the need to control or coerce recalcitrant frontier polities; the pre-emption of rival European influences. The secret of Anglo-Indian sub-imperial success was a con-

1. For the restrictive and defensive character of the earlier treaty ports, see Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy*, i. 156–61.

2. A. H. Imlah, *Lord Ellenborough* (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), pp. 213–28.

3. C. H. Philipps, *The East India Company, 1784–1833* (London, 1940), p. 259.

4. R. A. Huttenback, *British Relations with Sind, 1799–1843* (Berkeley, 1962), pp. 105–6; M. Yapp, *Strategies of British India* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 560–72.

5. A. K. Banerji, *Aspects of the Indo-British Economic Relations 1858–98* (Bombay, 1982), pp. 3–4, 9. India's merchandise exports increased by about five times between the 1850s and the 1890s.

6. Philipps, *East India Company*, p. 151.

7. J. Malcolm, *A Political History of India, 1784–1823* (London, 1826), ii. 126.

8. E. Stokes, 'The First Century of Colonial Rule in India', *Past and Present*, lviii (1973); P. Nightingale, *Trade and Empire in Western India, 1784–1806* (Cambridge, 1970) pp. 202, 240–4.

9. Yapp, *Strategies*, pp. 10, 18, 586–7.

junction of several crucial factors that was unique in Afro-Asia. The first was the extent to which pre-conquest India was already embarked upon a commercial revolution. The effect of this was not only to drain wealth and power away from the inland empire towards the coasts, but also to open up the subcontinent's economy to penetration by foreign traders to a far greater degree than in China or the interior of West Africa.[1] Moving easily into the interstices of Indian society and economy, Europeans became a local pressure group whose aggression and daring was in stark contrast with the sloth and timidity of the China coasters.[2] Thirdly, the East India Company's good fortune in Bengal and elsewhere was to inherit an established land revenue system – a great cash machine that funded their territorial expansion and fuelled their territorial appetite. Fourthly, the British also benefited from a military labour market in north India which allowed them to recruit Indian mercenaries whose services could be secured for cash and did not entail co-operation with or dependence upon tribal or feudal overlords.[3] Though the government of India was constantly forced to seek military assistance from Britain, it had the means to pay for London's help,[4] a vital factor in freeing it from over-zealous parliamentary scrutiny. Finally, the Indian hinterland offered the British the rare combination of a commercially and administratively sophisticated infrastructure turned comparatively easily to colonial purposes;[5] and a state system of mutually antagonistic 'country powers' whose jealousies could be exploited by British financial, military and diplomatic expertise.

If we add to these favourable conditions that the decisive phase of British aggrandisement between 1790 and 1820 could be justified at home as part of the struggle for imperial survival against France,[6] it is not difficult to see why the expansionist impulses of British-Indian governments were able to proceed unchecked by an effective metropolitan veto, and why by the 1850s the British-Indian empire had become such a large and important part of the mid-Victorian imperial system. It was not because the 'official mind' had acknowledged the primacy of India nor because India's contribution to the imperial system had earned a free rein from a grateful metropolis. Far from it. London constantly feared lest expansion kill the gilded Indian goose. India's unexpected rise to pre-eminence amongst Britain's dependencies perfectly reflected the incoherence of colonial expansion and the inability of the metropole to exert consistent influence except where the bridgeheads of occupation

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1. C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 229, 238, 240, 249.

2. Stokes, 'First Century'; H. Fuber, *John Company at Work* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), chs. vi, vii; id., *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient* (Minnesota, 1976), pp. 293-7.

3. D. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 180 ff.

4. Parliamentary Papers 1900 [131], XXIX.553, *Final Report of the Royal Commission on the Administration of the Expenditure of India*, p.96.

5. L. Subramanian, 'Banias and the British: The Role of Indigenous Credit in ... Imperial Expansion in Western India' *Modern Asian Studies*, xxi (1987), 473–510.

6. See C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian* (1988), p. 106.

were weak or dependent upon its financial or military aid. Instead, the uninhibited sub-imperialism of the Anglo-Indians was allowed to twist the whole imperial structure into what eventually became its late-Victorian configuration. The bloated empire of the *fin de siècle* was not the belated corollary of the mid-Victorians' soft spot for India: but only a measure of their chaotic, opportunistic, centrifugal imperialism.

If this analysis is correct, it suggests a somewhat modified description of mid-Victorian imperialism. Mid-Victorian Britain boasted an expansionist capability beyond Europe which, in its scale and ambition, outstripped its contemporary rivals. It was armed with an aggressively interventionist ideology deeply entrenched in public opinion and universalist in application. Free trade,[1] utilitarianism,[2] evangelical Christianity[3] and anti-slavery[4] were each capable of mobilizing important sectors of public opinion behind different forms of overseas expansion. Through these four components, sympathy for imperialism was widely diffused through British society. Secondly, these networks of interest in overseas activity were reinforced by new appetites in culture and consumption which had their origins in the consumer revolution and intellectual enlightenment of the previous century. Thirdly, by the mid-nineteenth century a coalition of economic forces promoted and underpinned Britain's extra-European expansion: cheap long-term credit, the essential ingredient for penetrating new markets and harnessing new suppliers;[5] manufactured exports between fourteen and two hundred times cheaper than the local artisanal competition;[6] and a great and growing supply of migrants – those 'ideal prefabricated collaborators',[7] who carried their capital, consumer tastes and productive capacity with them to new countries. Fourthly, Britain possessed a maritime superiority, mercantile and military, whose weight increased disproportionately in extra-European waters, where modern navies were scarce.[8] Lastly, in India, she had already acquired by the 1830s an army that could be used across Asia and a great listening-post for

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1. See B. Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 139, 145, 151.

2. E. T. Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959).

3. By mid-century, thought Sir George Stephen (*Antislavery Recollections* [London, 1854], pp. 230–1), about a third of the membership of the Commons was 'more or less of avowed religious principles': quoted in F. K. Brown, *The Fathers of the Victorians* (Cambridge, 1961), p. 271.

4. For anti-slavery's role as the 'external' expression of disparate reformist causes, see D. Turley, *The Culture of English Anti-Slavery* (London, 1991), p. 44; for the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, H. Temperley, *British Anti-Slavery, 1833–70* (London, 1972). Apart from its hundred or so auxiliary societies spread through the provinces, the London-based BFASS alone had 850 members in 1847 – as many as the Movement for Colonial Freedom in the 1950s.

5. Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion*, pp. 179–80.

6. For this calculation, see P. Bairoch, *Economics and World History* (Hemel Hempstead, 1993), pp. 89 ff.

7. For this term, see R. Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism', in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. R. Owen and B. Sutcliffe (London, 1972), p. 124.

8. See G. S. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy* (London, 1965); C. J. Bartlett, *Great Britain and Sea Power, 1815–1853* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 22, 233.

oriental intelligence, whence knowledge of Asian topography, trade, climate, government, social structure, religion and disease could be relayed back to London. By mid-nineteenth century standards, this was an astonishing portfolio of motivations and capacities, but perhaps its most important feature was the versatility with which it endowed British expansionism. With commercial, industrial, missionary, settler, scientific, naval and military interests to advance, and a variety of ideological and religious messages to transmit, there were few societies which British influence in one form or another was incapable of infiltrating. In principle, the scope of mid-Victorian imperialism was limitless.

In practice, both the form and extent of expansion were significantly constrained. Contrary to much assertion, mid-Victorian Britain was not a hegemonic power. At best, she enjoyed an extra-European 'semi-hegemony' – a series of discontinuous regional hegemonies. Her sea-power assured superiority rather than supremacy.[1] In the Near East, the Americas[2] and on the China coast, the interests and military capacity of other powers drastically limited the scope for unilateral intervention or annexation. Equally, there were many regions where British traders could find little in the way of markets or cargo and where there was no 'country trade' to capture – the means by which the British had broken into China and other Asian markets. Even where merchant, settler or proconsular sub-imperialism was able to enlist support from home, the struggle to carve out a wider zone of free trade, settlement, administration or influence was acutely vulnerable to the politico-financial cycle of enthusiasm and disillusionment at home. 'If the [China] war lasts', Sidney Herbert warned Canning, the Indian viceroy, 'the public here will leave us and our war in the lurch. When we were in the wrong ... they were all for blood and fury. Now they are weary of the whole thing.'[3] A change of government, a budgetary crisis, a military setback – any of these could lead to the abrupt curtailment of overseas commitments, at least until a new coalition of political support could be assembled. The instability of parliamentary politics constantly cut against the grain of a continuous expansionist trend to produce a jagged, unpredictable frontier of imperial advance.

One approach to the apparently random territorial preferences of Victorian expansion is offered by the sophisticated literature which has grown up on the multiple entrées which British interests made in the extra-European world, and on the reciprocal impulses which travelled between the centre and its diverse peripheries. Work on the structure of

1. C. I. Hamilton, *Anglo-French Naval Rivalry, 1840–1870* (Oxford, 1993); H. Blumethal, *Franco-American Relations, 1830–1871* (Chapel Hill, 1959), pp. 35, 43–6.

2. For the influence of Anglo-French tension on Britain's Oregon diplomacy, 1844–6, see Bartlett, *Sea Power*, pp. 175–81; Galbraith, *Hudson's Bay Company* p. 246; and R. Bullen, *Palmerston, Guizot and the Collapse of the Entente Cordiale* (London, 1974), pp. 38–41.

3. Herbert to Canning, 21 July 1860: Lord Stanmore, *Sidney Herbert: A Memoir* (London, 1906), ii. 324–5.

overseas mercantile enterprise,[1] the growth of business 'empires',[2] the role of sub-imperialist tycoons like Rhodes, Goldie and Mackinnon,[3] the organization of missionary and geographical endeavour,[4] the tenacious empire-building of local officialdom[5] and the formation of lobbies or 'special publics' at home,[6] is deeply suggestive of the perennial tensions between the 'head office' of empire and the local branches; the methods of lobbyists in the metropole and promoters in the periphery; and the crucial influence exerted by the 'colonial' environment on the tactics, opportunities, needs and discretion of local agents. By drawing on this literature, it may be possible to construct a broader, generic concept of the 'bridgehead' to help explain the baffling shape of the Victorian empire.

The bridgehead was the hinge or 'interface' between the metropole and a local periphery. It was the transmission shaft of imperialism and the recruiting sergeant of collaborators. It might be a commercial, settler, missionary or proconsular presence or a combination of all four. It might be a decaying factory on a torrid coast or, at its grandest, the 'Company Bahadur'. Whether British influence grew, or was transformed into formal or informal empire, largely depended upon the circumstances and performance of the bridgehead. How skilfully did it exploit the political, economic or ecological characteristics of its host environment? How efficiently could it transmit the power of the metropole into its periphery? Could it attract, or pay for, substantial European manpower – so often the means of winning local domination? How effectively could it command by coercion or collaboration, the local political resources required to fashion a responsive political economy? How quickly could it build a local political 'infrastructure' as a vehicle for further injections of force or influence from the metropole? How dependent was it on the short-term swings of policy endemic in parliamentary government? How effectively could it lobby for military, financial or diplomatic assistance? At one extreme, a bridgehead which

1. See S. D. Chapman, *Merchant Enterprise in Britain from the Industrial Revolution to the First World War* (Cambridge, 1992); A. N. Porter, *Victorian Shipping, Business and Imperial Policy: Donald Currie, the Castle Line and Southern Africa* (Woodbridge, 1986); B. M. Ratcliffe, 'Commerce and Empire: Manchester Merchants and West Africa, 1873–1895', *Jnl. of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vii (1979), 293–320; and D. R. SarDesai, *British Trade and Expansion in South East Asia* (New Delhi, 1971).

2. For a pioneering study, see A. G. Hopkins, 'Imperial business in Africa', *Jnl. of African History*, xvii–xviii (1976).

3. See R. Rotberg, *The Founder* (Oxford, 1988), for Rhodes; J. Flint, *Sir George Goldie and the Making of Nigeria*, (London, 1960); J. Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa*, (Cambridge, 1976).

4. A. N. Porter, 'Religion and Empire: British Expansion in the Long Nineteenth Century', *Jnl. of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, xx (1992), 370–90; R. A. Stafford, *Scientist of Empire* (Cambridge, 1989); R. C. Bridges, 'Europeans and East Africans in the Age of Exploration', *Geographical Jnl.*, cxxxix (1973), 220–32; F. V. Emery, 'Geography and Imperialism: The Role of Sir Bartle Frere (1815–1884)', ibid., cl (1984), 342–50.

5. R. V. Kubicek, 'The Colonial Steamer and the Occupation of West Africa by the Victorian State, 1840–1900', *Jnl. of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, xviii (1990), 9–32.

6. D. Helly, 'Informed Opinion and Africa, 1860–90' *African Affairs*, lxviii (1969), 195–217.

captured a revenue system, possessed its own army and mustered a powerful lobby could expand with little regard for wider metropolitan opinion. At another, military weakness and financial penury made survival, let alone expansion, dependent on rhetoric in a remote assembly. In a third case, a commercial bridgehead with no means of exerting any systematic political influence or of exploiting any available form of metropolitan intervention, accommodated itself to local society and merely occupied a favoured commercial and cultural niche within it. With the prolific creation of new bridgeheads and the reinforcement of old, it was little wonder that mid-Victorian governments displayed such ambivalence about the new liabilities that they seemed likely to load upon them.

Ever since Hobson drew his famous connection between capital exports and colonial expansion, historians have been mesmerized by the rapid growth of Britain's formal empire after 1880. Such a quantitative expansion of territory seemed to imply a qualitative change in British imperialism, or in the drives behind it. Depending on historiographical taste, the British now became more domineering, more defensive or more desperate about their economic and political prospects as a great power. But, however striking, African annexations and the forward movements in the Pacific and south-east Asia did not represent a dramatic change in the overall pattern of British imperial expansion since 1815. The western half of Australia (annexed 1824–9); New Zealand; western Canada (1858–70; the Maratha territories, Assam, southern Burma, Mysore, Sind, Punjab, Jhansi and Oudh in South Asia; Natal, the Gold Coast and Lagos in Africa; Fiji in the Pacific: all these (and more) had been brought under formal rule between 1815 and 1874. The pre-emptive annexation of economic deserts on geopolitical grounds was, if anything, a more notable feature of British imperialism before 1875 than it was thereafter. On this view, the colonial incorporation of tropical Africa was not so much remarkable as curiously retarded. Nor, if we stand back from the map of Africa and take a more synoptic view of world history, was the much more rapid European penetration of its interior after 1880 an isolated or surprising event. American settlements had taken over two hundred years to crawl westward from the Atlantic seaboard and reach the Mississippi, but less than sixty to cross the plains and close the frontier by 1890.[1] Canadian settlers colonized the Prairies (some 750,000 square miles) in a generation after 1885. European occupation of Australian and New Zealand hinterlands speeded up sharply after 1870. In Argentina and Chile, the annihilation of indigenous resistance in the 1880s opened up new tracts to European settlement.[2] Russian colonization rushed headlong into central and north-east Asia

1. Frederick Jackson Turner calculated that it took a century for the English settlements to reach a hundred miles inland from the Atlantic coast: *The Frontier in American History* (London, 1920), p. 67.
2. M. Jefferson, *The Peopling of the Argentine Pampas* (New York, 1926), p. 46.

after 1890 sending some five million settlers to Siberia by 1914.[1] Almost everywhere, the older bridgeheads of European economic, political and cultural influence were being enlarged at breakneck speed, drawing on new or expanded supplies of capital and migrants, on improved technologies (especially of communications) and better knowledge of alien environments.

From this perspective, what was really surprising about late Victorian formal expansion was not so much its gargantuan appetite as its eccentric progression through the available menu. Tropical Africa, where traders were few and settlers almost non-existent, was swallowed while juicier morsels (like Persia or Siam), economically or strategically more desirable, were turned away or their annexation deferred. What lends the partition of Africa its historical fascination, then, is the light which it seems to cast upon the hidden motives and unspoken assumptions of late Victorian imperialism: if formal empire was economically objectless, how else was it to be explained and what function was it meant to serve in the existing ensemble of colonies and semi-colonies?

So far the most powerful hypothesis has been that late Victorian annexationism was a defensive response to new dangers.[2] Further territorial acquisitions were required to protect the gains of mid-Victorian expansion against new enemies, external and internal. British intervention was thus triggered by the onset of a 'local crisis' which threatened the informal predominance built up in previous decades; or by the fear that an imperial rival might exclude or subvert British interests. But annexation was, characteristically, not invoked in aid of private enterprise. Before the policy-makers would condescend to raise the imperial umbrella by protection or annexation, they had to be satisfied that a 'national interest' was at stake. Two contrasting zones of British activity seem to confirm this hypothesis. In China British refusal to annex suggested that informal influence was sufficient to safeguard purely commercial interests. Accepting new territorial obligations in tropical Africa where trade was exiguous revealed the true motive of formal empire. Indeed, British intervention in East Africa after 1880 has come to stand proxy for a view of late Victorian imperialism which sees it as preoccupied with strategy rather than economics, gloomily defensive in mood and obsessed above all with the strategic protection of the routes to India and of India itself.[3]

Closer inspection suggests a different view. After all, it could scarcely be argued that the symptoms of 'local crisis' in China were less acute than in tropical Africa; nor that British commercial interests were considered expendable; nor that the British had been reluctant in the

1. D. Treadgold, *The Great Siberian Migration* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 33-4, calculates a total of 5.3 million for 1887-1913.

2. The classic expression of this view is R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians* (London, 1961).

3. The Anglo-German agreement of 1890, remarked D. K. Fieldhouse, was 'a classic example of the diplomacy of late 19th century imperialism': *Economics and Empire*, p. 380.

past to promote them – to the tune of three wars; nor that, with the intensification of Russian, German, French, Japanese and American rivalry, British interests were safer than in Africa. To explain away the non-partition of China, historians have usually argued either that the official mind regarded the 'national interest' as best served by resisting the break-up of the Manchu empire; or that the nature of British economic interests – essentially financial rather than commercial – positively dictated a strenuous effort to hold the Chinese state together as a fair field for multinational financial enterprise.[1] These arguments provoke several questions. What had happened to the aggressive sub-imperialist outlook of earlier British traders so influential on policy in the 1830s and 1840s? Why had Britain's bridgeheads in a decaying oriental empire failed to enlarge their local hinterlands of influence and collaboration and to engineer the circumstances that so often made imperial intervention unavoidable? Why, if it was the case, had British interests in China metamorphosed into the bland multinational conservatism of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation?

The real key to British self-restraint is to be found not in the superior insight of the policy-makers but in the extent to which the underdevelopment of British private interests in China maximized official freedom of action and safeguarded narrowly diplomatic priorities. For all the *élan* of the early free traders who had invaded the treaty ports and built up Shanghai, British enterprise had remained curiously inhibited and unadventurous. 'The British trader', complained Archibald Colquhoun, 'settles at a treaty port, declines to learn the "beastly language" and is content to entrust his goods to Chinese agencies for disposal inland'.[2] British society in China was dominated by the treaty port consulates and by the commercial hierarchies of the major trading houses and banks. It showed little public spirit for the pursuit of British interests, sneered a close observer of Shanghai life.[3] Increasingly, it drew its ethos, not from the colonies of settlement with their egalitarian tendencies, but from late Victorian India, where status differences between Europeans were maintained with byzantine rigour. There was no Rhodes, Goldie or even Mackinnon in the treaty ports – entrepreneurs capable of building a local business empire and exerting a comparable influence in London. The efficient secret of successful sub-imperialism – local power *and* metropolitan influence – eluded the Old China Hands.

In reality the scope for 'Rhodesian' methods was small. The obscurities of Chinese currency and commercial practice and the difficulty of penetrating the China market without an acceptable Chinese intermediary had made Western traders heavily dependent upon the compradore.

1. See Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, i. 444–6; Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire*, p. 436.
2. A. Colquhoun, *China in Transformation* (London, 1898), p. 145.
3. [University of Toronto Library (microfilm)], MSS J. O. P. Bland, box 4: J. O. P. Bland to V. Chirol, 7 June 1903. Bland had been Secretary to the Shanghai municipal council, the representative body of the Anglo-American settlement. Chirol was foreign editor of *The Times*.

The compradore was usually a substantial Chinese merchant who acted as the agent for a foreign firm located in one of the treaty parts. He supervised all commercial relations with other Chinese, was a key source of market information and guaranteed financial transactions with Chinese customers.[1] He supplied or mobilized locally the capital the Europeans could not bring from home;[2] alliance with a powerful compradore was indispensable to business success. But their fees and perquisites were a huge drain on their employers and had helped to drive European firms back from the lesser to the major treaty ports before the end of the century. In effect, the compradore system turned out to be a means of containing and controlling Western businessmen in China, especially in conjunction with the rules of extra-territoriality first laid down in 1842.[3] British traders were glad of the privileges conferred by the unequal treaties; but the price was their subordination to the authority of the consul, and their dependence upon British officialdom for all formal transactions with the Chinese bureaucracy. Between them, consul and compradore blunted a febrile mercantile sub-imperialism. It was impossible to exercise British treaty rights in the interior without Foreign Office support, grumbled Bland, the would-be Rhodes of the China Coast, in 1897.[4] Eight years later, he was still lamenting that the 'apathy shown by our consular and ministerial [i.e. diplomatic] friends ... is the real White Man's burden in this country'[5]. In Bland's frustrated career as the manager of the principal British railway concession, in his abject dependence upon official support in this role, can be seen in microcosm all the weaknesses of the British bridgehead in China, and an explanation why, almost by default, the banking and financial interest came to predominate amongst Britain's China interests.[6] Hobbled by intermediaries, dominated by the largest firms whose leaders had most to lose from official disapproval and afraid in 1900 for their mere physical safety, it was little wonder that the merchant interests organized into the China Association and its activist offshoot the China League, made little headway with their programme for a 'Yangtse protectorate' (the effective occupation of the sphere of economic preponderance agreed in the Anglo-Russian negotiations in April 1899),

1. See Y. P. Hao, *The Compradore in Nineteenth Century China* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

2. Ibid., ch. iv.

3. For the difficulties facing foreign businessmen engaged in local manufacture, see R. Y. Eng, 'Chinese Entrepreneurs, the Government and the Foreign Sector: The Canton and Shanghai Silk-reeling Enterprises, 1861–1932', *Modern Asian Studies* xviii (1984), 353–70. For the general situation, S. R. Brown, 'The Partially-Opened Door: Limitations on Economic Change in China in the 1860s', ibid., xii (1978), 177–92.

4. MSS J. O. P. Bland, Box 1: Bland to Chirol, 9 July 1897.

5. MSS J. O. P. Bland, Box 4: Bland to F. Mayers, 24 Jan. 1905. In his *Recent Events and Present Policies in China* (London, 1912), ch. x, Bland launched a sustained attack on British policy since the 1860s. There was no hope of diplomacy opening China to the free transit trade promised in the Tsientsin treaty 'unless backed by horse, foot and artillery'.

6. For the move from commodities into finance and then into local manufacturing within the treaty ports, see J. Osterhammel, 'British Business in China, 1860s – 1950s', in *British Business in Asia since 1860*, ed. R. Davenport-Hines and G. Jones (Cambridge, 1989).

greater British intervention at the provincial level and more effective control over the railway concessions.[1] In July 1900, at the height of the Boxer Crisis, the British cabinet had briefly flirted with unilateral intervention on the Yangtse, but shrank from the prospect.[2] Preoccupied with South Africa, desperate for rapprochement with Russia and dismayed by naval weakness, London refused to consider more than a diplomatic defence of British interests after 1900, and easily brushed aside the half-hearted lobby raised by the 'insurgents'.[3] At its moment of greatest opportunity, British sub-imperialism in China found itself emasculated by the effects of a dependency culture. Bland was reduced by 1907 to wistful admiration of Japanese methods.[4]

Compared with China, there were several general circumstances which, once a motive was supplied, helped to make much of Africa far more amenable to partition and occupation. The more limited scale of state-building and cultural unification there made it more easily penetrable both by the creeping colonial expansion which began long before the 1870s, and by the explorer-filibusters of whom Leopold was merely a Brobdingnagian exemplar. The low density of population, even in many regions congenial to European interlopers, removed an important physical and psychological barrier and reduced the material and manpower needed for foreign domination. The growth here and there of an extractive rather than mercantile economy (in diamonds, gold, rubber and ivory) encouraged the assertion of direct control over land and labour beyond the wildest dreams of the Old China Hands and funded the most successful experiments in private empire-building. The absence of any treaty framework for international co-operation of the kind established early on in China reduced the legal and diplomatic restraints on private or local initiative; and then, when it was instituted in the 1880s, dramatically increased the incentives for 'effective occupation'. Finally, the most powerful external check on British action in China – the tenacious Eurasian rivalry of Russia – was conspicuously absent in Africa. The imperial competition of France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain was at best manageable, at worst containable, and only rarely threatened the general crisis of imperial security which any collision with Russia in the Far East was expected to set off.

Of the various theatres of British intervention in Africa after 1880, it is East Africa which has usually been seen as the *locus classicus* of imperial grand strategy, and the uncluttered playground of the official mind, where its characteristic preoccupations were most vigorously displayed. Here, where commercial impulses were weak or non-existent, strategic necessity was, or became, overwhelming. Uganda and the Sudan, economically worthless, fell under more or less direct British

1. For the merchants' programme in July 1899, see Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*, p. 5.
2. L. K. Young, *British Policy in China, 1895–1902* (Oxford, 1970), p. 170.
3. Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*, pp. 267–76.
4. MSS J. O. P. Bland, Box 23: Bland to Addis, 23 Sept. 1907.

sway because the policy-makers in London were convinced that without effective occupation of the Upper Nile to its source in Lake Victoria, Britain's control over Egypt and the Suez Canal – the strategic linch-pin of the Anglo-Indian system – would never be safe. It was the discovery of this strategic imperative, once the 'temporary occupation' of Egypt in 1882 began hardening into permanency, which explained the timing of British participation in a scramble for East Africa. Above all, it dictated the regions of East Africa which the British government wanted. Formal empire in East Africa was thus the product of high policy, not low sub-imperialist intrigue. Salisbury, the architect of this unwilling experiment in tropical empire, was the cynical grandmaster of the imperial chessboard, ruthlessly sacrificing his pawns and occupying a square here or there not for its intrinsic value, but because it allowed him to protect the vitals of his world-system.

This view, founded upon the brilliant insights of Gallagher and Robinson and traceable ultimately to Gwendolen Cecil's biography of her father, has been accepted with surprising alacrity by historians of imperialism and the partition.[1] It turns essentially upon an interpretation of Salisbury's purposes in the Anglo-German negotiations of 1890 which secured Britain's claim to Uganda and her access to the Upper Nile from the East African coast. What other motive except grand strategy could have attracted Salisbury's attention to this remote and potentially troublesome African fastness? If Salisbury wanted Uganda of all places for reasons of grand strategy, then British reasons for acquiring Sudan, Kenya and Zanzibar fell into place. They were all outworks for the strategic defence of Egypt, just as Egypt was for India.

The trouble is that the evidence for all this is astonishingly slender and extremely speculative. There is no direct evidence of Salisbury's intentions[2] and the circumstantial evidence is highly ambiguous. There are few grounds for doubting that the original occupation of Egypt in 1882 was undertaken primarily for strategic reasons, although it is worth noticing that the Gladstone ministry acted under heavy pressure from its man on the spot as well as from an internal strategic 'lobby'; in fear of an imminent catastrophe for European lives and interests; and under the crucial misapprehension that no serious diplomatic complications would ensue.[3] But it is far from clear that it was London's eventual discovery of the strategic implications of holding Egypt which determined the claim to Uganda in 1890, the assumption of a protectorate there and in Kenya in 1894–5, or the timing of the conquest of the Sudan initiated in 1896. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that London's

1. G. Cecil, *The Life of the Fourth Marquess of Salisbury* (London, 1932), iv. 38–9 ff.

2. Cecil, *Salisbury*, iv. 282: 'Rarely can a political enterprise of equal importance have left behind so few traces of its incubation'.

3. This was Gladstone's judgement on the immediate intervention: *The Gladstone Diaries*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew, Vol. x: *1881–83* (Oxford 1990), p. 296. For an argument stressing the incoherence of the Gladstone cabinet's policy-making, see J. S. Galbraith and Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'The British Occupation of Egypt: Another View', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, ix (1978), 471–88.

role approximated much more to that which it had played in West Africa: permissive, responsive and micawberish; not masterful, creative or (strategically) visionary. Here, as so often elsewhere, local factors and sub-imperialist forces made the running: not the official mind.

The 'strategic' or 'high policy' view of British East African policy in 1890 rests upon four pieces of evidence: Gwendolen Cecil's undocumented assertion that the Nile Valley became a 'separate and dominating factor in [Salisbury's] diplomacy' after the middle of 1889;[1] Salisbury's acknowledgement to Baring in March 1890 that no other European power should control the Nile's affluents – or the valley itself;[2] his handling of the Anglo-German negotiations revealing, supposedly, a preoccupation with Uganda over other British interests in East Africa; and Salisbury's remarks in the Lords in July 1890, justifying the agreement and the concession of Heligoland to Germany.[3] Salisbury in this interpretation had undergone a Pauline conversion in 1889 to the absolute necessity of excluding other European claimants from the Nile Valley and now perceived, what he had hitherto rejected, the vital importance of Uganda and access to it. But the more closely the evidence is inspected, the less it seems able to bear this baroque historiographical superstructure.

It was, of course, not Salisbury but Baring (later Lord Cromer) who first propounded the exclusion policy for the Nile Valley in a long despatch in December 1889.[4] Baring was notoriously anxious not to jeopardize Egypt's fragile finances by a premature reconquest of the Sudan. But he was equally determined for local strategic[5] and political reasons that sooner or later Egypt should regain its lost colony. Italian activity in Abyssinia was the trigger for his emphatic appeal to Salisbury to supplement Egypt's weakened claim to the Sudan by British diplomatic support. Baring was no ordinary proconsul. As a former finance member of the government of India, *persona grata* with both main parties, one of an extremely influential clan, the recognised mastermind behind Egypt's financial recovery and a dab hand at covert lobbying,[6] he was as undismissable as a viceroy. Salisbury's reply to this overmighty subject was suitably soothing. Italy, the least of the great powers, would be warned off.[7] But when it came to negotiating a limit to Italy's claims, Salisbury's attitude was curiously non-committal. It was, after all, really an Egyptian matter, he told a bemused Baring: he, Baring, could nego-

1. Cecil, *Salisbury*, iv. 138–9.
2. Ibid., 326.
3. *Hansard*, 3rd ser. (Lords), cccxlvi, cols. 1263–70.
4. Baring to Salisbury, 15 Dec. 1889: M. Shibeika, *British Policy in the Sudan, 1882–1902* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 321–3.
5. Shibeika, *British Policy*, p. 313. Apart from the political difficulties created in Egypt by the loss of the Sudan, the loss of Khartoum exposed Upper Egypt to the continual threat of flanking attacks from the desert and heightened Cairo's military dependence on London.
6. Bodleian, MSS Milner 3: Dawkins (Cairo) to Milner, 18 Feb. 1895; 17 June 1896.
7. Cecil, *Salisbury*, iv. 326; Shibeika, *British Policy*, p. 323.

tiate with the Italians if he liked. When Baring did negotiate (abortively), Salisbury's notably vague instructions poured cold water on his fears: it was unlikely that the Italians would stay the course in Africa; financial weakness would soon force them to retire.[1] Set alongside his discouragement of Baring's plans for a military advance near Suakin,[2] this suggests not so much a Pauline conversion as a continuing profound scepticism about the urgency of defending the Nile Valley against all comers.

It certainly does not point towards the newfound strategic significance of Uganda and the Nile source, not least since even Baring regarded the recovery of Egypt's old province in Equatoria – the southern Sudan – as unnecessary and undesirable.[3] Five British interests were in question in East Africa in 1890: Zanzibar, which German influence threatened to destabilize, dominate and perhaps incorporate; the British sphere agreed in 1886–7, threatened potentially by an enveloping German protectorate at Witu; Uganda, the focus of the Imperial British East Africa Company's commercial activity; Nyasaland, where Rhodes and the missionaries aspired to northward expansion; and the prospect of a corridor to connect Rhodes's interests in northern Zambezia with the IBEAC's in Uganda. Salisbury, runs the conventional argument, with his eyes fixed on the Upper Nile, was ready to sacrifice the Nyasaland interests and the all-red route in order to secure Uganda and Witu (with its hinterland claim towards the Nile Valley). But the evidence is opaque. The 'Witu thesis' has been vigorously disputed;[4] the all-red corridor was secured, apparently, by Mackinnon's treaty with Leopold; Uganda was readily conceded by the Germans early in the negotiations and was not thereafter an issue; and Salisbury extended a protectorate over Zanzibar, not Uganda. Moreover, there is evidence from the German side that Salisbury was willing to make concessions over Witu to safeguard the missionary and commercial interests in Nyasaland.[5]

Salisbury's diplomacy can be explained without invoking a novel and urgent preoccupation with the strategic value of the Nile Valley. He had never discounted British claims to a sphere in East Africa: in Zanzibar especially 'the English and India interests are both too strong' to allow Germany a free hand, he had told Malet in 1888.[6] To protect Zanzibar against German pressure and safeguard British and Indian commercial interests on the Coast, he had negotiated the spheres agreement with Germany in 1886–7. To strengthen the local position of Mackinnon's

1. Cecil, *Salisbury*, iv. 329.
2. Ibid., 330: Salisbury to Baring, 31 Aug. 1890.
3. I. R. Smith, *The Emin Pasha Relief Expedition* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 38 ff.
4. See D. Gillard, 'Salisbury's African Policy and the Heligoland Offer of 1890', *ante*, lxxv (1960), 631–53; and Gillard, 'Salisbury's Heligoland Offer: The Case against the 'Witu Thesis', *ante*, lxxx (1965), 548.
5. I am grateful for this information to Arne Perras.
6. Cecil, *Salisbury*, iv. 234. Malet was ambassador at Berlin.

East African Company, it had been granted a royal charter also in 1888. But within a year, Salisbury's cheap diplomatic defence of British interests was near breakdown. The Emin Pasha Relief Expedition screwed up the mutual antagonism of British and German colonial lobbies.[1] Its messy aftermath encouraged the German Karl Peters to prospect for treaties in Uganda where Mackinnon's company was trying to establish itself. And the crisis of German pressure on Zanzibar seemed to be coming to a head. Luckily for Salisbury, German fears about Rhodes also made them eager to negotiate, but he had little option but to seek some form of East African settlement if the gains of 1886–7 were not to be reversed amid Anglo-German acrimony and public criticism at home. To make matters worse, H. M. Stanley, lionized in Britain in 1889–90, used his fame to intensify pressure on Salisbury during the negotiations.[2]

But why Uganda? Regardless of its speculative strategic significance, Salisbury had little choice but to insist on its inclusion within the British sphere. It formed the natural westward extension of the British zone demarcated in 1886–7. More to the point, its commercial prospects, however diminutive in absolute terms, were the key to the commercial survival of the whole British sphere, and above all, to the solvency of the IBEAC.[3] The IBEAC was the mainstay of British influence on the Coast and a vital bulwark (through its lease payments to the Sultan[4] of Zanzibar's independence of Germany. Without Uganda, the Company would collapse; without the Company the British sphere would be a vacuum and Zanzibar vulnerable. This and not the putative strategic benefits, was the real meaning behind Salisbury's remarks in the Lords in July 1890, which read more convincingly as a claim to have reserved the Upper Nile for British commercial enterprise against the threat of European annexations.[5]

Finally, there is circumstantial evidence that Salisbury's instincts in East Africa were not so different from those that guided him elsewhere. Having secured Uganda for the Company, Salisbury lost interest in the country. He remained unmoved when the Company's financial weakness seemed likely to force its withdrawal from the Great Lakes region, so that Gladstone, entering office on August 1894, could argue plausibly that his predecessor had tacitly acquiesced in evacuation.[6] Salisbury himself claimed privately that he had only secured Uganda in 1890 to appease the Company, a remark that fits oddly with the strategic hypothesis. 'The Company have been very improvident', he told Portal

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1. Smith, *Emin Pasha*, p. 298–9.
2. J. S. Galbraith, *Mackinnon and East Africa* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 184–6. Salisbury complained to Malet in May 1890 that 'sentimental considerations' and 'powerful commercial motives' had created an exaggerated interest in the Lakes region: Gillard, 'Salisbury's Heligoland Offer', 548.
3. Galbraith, *Mackinnon*, p. 152.
4. Ibid., p. 164.
5. *Hansard*, 3rd ser. (Lords), cccxlvi, col. 1264.
6. *Gladstone Diaries*, ed. Matthew, Vol. xiii: *1892–1896* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 79, 84, 86.

(the British consul in Zanzibar) in September 1892. 'They practically forced me to take Uganda without considering for a moment whether they had the means to hold it. I am afraid that their collapse can hardly be averted.'[1] Portal himself, as a protégé of Salisbury (and an insider in the 1890 negotiations with Germany) and also of Baring (his real mentor whom he hoped to succeed in Cairo), could hardly have overlooked his patrons' interest in Uganda as an outwork for the defence of Egypt – if it had existed. Yet his demi-official homeward correspondence in 1891–2, as the Company's withdrawal from Uganda grew more imminent, betrays no hint of this conception of Uganda's significance. Instead, Portal argued in classic proconsular fashion that the collapse of the Company in Uganda would bring discredit on the British throughout East Africa, drastically weakening their position and influence.[2] Portal himself regarded Zanzibar as the future Hong Kong of East Africa[3] and as the real key to British influence: Uganda as its remote, troublesome but ultimately indispensable hinterland.

None of this is conclusive, but it is suggestive. The evidence for Salisbury's strategic motivation is at best meagre, at worst non-existent. If Salisbury did not have a strategic motive to acquire Uganda in 1890, what motive did he have? How else are we to explain his diplomacy except as a cautious defence of an 'established' interest already acknowledged in 1886? East Africa's economic prospects may have been exiguous; but by contrast with China, British interests had established (apparently) an infrastructure of control in the hinterland; there was little evidence of local resistance; and the diplomatic implications were manageable. This more prosaic view of Salisbury's aims puts less strain on the evidence. Here, as so often elsewhere, Salisbury found himself struggling to regulate the effects of private expansionism, to parry its domestic lobbying and to balance the weight of British interests on the spot against the wider diplomatic pressures to which London was exposed.[4] That Salisbury carried off so much in 1890 at the cost of Heligoland may say less about his motives than about his virtuosity as a negotiator and the temporary strength of his bargaining position. Like his mid-Victorian predecessors, Salisbury was concerned to stabilize Britain's foreign commitments. But like them he often found it impossible to resist the forward pressure of proconsuls and private interests who skilfully fabricated cases for intervention.

These two cases suggest that we need to look beyond the conventional hypothesis to explain the pattern of territorial expansion. What is striking is not the rigour with which the official mind computed the

1. [Rhodes House Library, Oxford], Portal Papers, MSS Afr S 113: Salisbury to Portal, 4 Sept. 1892.
2. For Portal's correspondence with Sir Percy Anderson, 1891–2, see Portal Papers, MSS Afr S 105, 106.
3. Portal Papers, MSS Afr S 106: Portal to Salisbury, 15 Aug. 1892; MSS Afr S 105; Portal to Sir P. Anderson, 2 Nov. 1891.
4. For an interpretation along these lines (though she excepts the Nile Valley), see Cecil, *Salisbury*, iv. 336.

'national interest' nor its deployment of strategic insight to calibrate the
scale of British intervention. On most occasions the variables at work
were less arcane. The real decision the policy-makers had to take was
whether the strength of the local 'bridgehead' and the force of its
domestic lobby outweighed the diplomatic and military hazards of a
forward policy. Not infrequently, these variables proved hard to
measure and dangerously volatile. The new conditions of world and
domestic politics after 1880 exacerbated the difficulty. Buffeted by
lobbies from every side, tempted by visions of effortless dominion,
disoriented by the instability of late-century geopolitics, the official
mind, even under Salisbury, continually relapsed into its habitual
schizophrenia.

Thus, late Victorian governments did not annex so widely in tropical
Africa because this was the only way of maintaining their mid-Victorian
interests. Nor did they espouse pessimistic new doctrines of relative
decline. They annexed for the same reasons as mid-Victorian govern-
ments: because local British interests pressed them to do so and, in the
absence of powerful diplomatic, financial or military objections, the will
to refuse was lacking. If Africa was partitioned before China, Iran or
Turkey, it was not because its strategic, let alone its economic, value was
greater. By the 1880s, the modest inputs of local power needed for
conquest had been assembled with an adequate lobby to champion the
sub-imperialist cause at home. Without the geopolitical constraints
which disfavoured annexation elsewhere, the competitive coexistence of
rival imperialisms loaded the incentives in favour of peaceful partition.
What made the Scramble so spectacular was that in Africa these local,
domestic and international pressures converged to create in a sudden
burst precisely the conditions in which all Victorian governments, early,
middle or late, found intervention or annexation irresistible.

The argument of this paper has been that we need to move beyond the
existing historiography to explain the seemingly random course of
Victorian imperialism. For all its attractions, the influential model in
which a platonic official mind reluctantly licenses defensive annexations
when the national interest is threatened by local crisis on the periphery
needs modification if it is to explain the global pattern of Victorian
expansion. But it is doubtful whether its defects can be remedied by
locating the whole impetus for expansion in the metropole or in the
single-minded promotion of a particular interest, however powerful, by
a like-minded oligarchy of gentlemen capitalists.

For this task, the open-ended hypotheses framed by Gallagher and
Robinson in the 'imperialism of free trade' offer a better starting point
than the more closed and rigid model derived by later writers from their
case-study of the Partition. In that original formulation, with its global
compass, the part played by government and the policy makers necess-
arily bulks less large than in the special conditions of the African

Scramble. It allows us to see, as much recent work has emphasized, that the engine of British expansion throughout the nineteenth century was the chaotic pluralism of private and sub-imperial interests: religious, commercial, strategic, humanitarian, scientific, speculative and migrational. The role of government was sometimes to facilitate, sometimes to regulate, this multiple expansive momentum. Government had its own purposes: containing its financial and military commitments; avoiding diplomatic embarrassment or worse; guarding the Anglo-Indian strategic corridor. But it could rarely afford to obstruct powerful expansionist groups or identify itself too closely or for too long with any one of them. Since these interest groups grew collectively larger and more vocal in the later nineteenth century, it was not surprising that governments of all political complexions acceded more readily to their wishes.

But how did Victorian governments discriminate between the zones that could safely be left to informal influence and those where nothing short of annexation would do? If we look at Victorian expansion world-wide, strategic imperatives and/or commercial need offer at best only partial explanations for the character and timing of British intervention. The crucial variable was the 'bridgehead': the purchase achieved by British interests on their zone of operations.[1] Where they failed to establish a local political or diplomatic infrastructure into which imperial power could be readily injected – as in Senegambia or the Yangtse valley – London found it easy to reject their special pleading.[2] Conversely, British willingness to intervene so forcibly in South Africa in 1899 was predicated as much upon the reinforcement of the local means to regional primacy – the loyalist population (on which Milner laid such emphasis); the Uitlanders; Rhodes's political machine; his pre-emption of Zambezia; and, not least, the economic potential of the goldfields – as upon the urgency of any strategic or commercial threat.

The South African case is a reminder that we must also look to the domestic end of the imperial axis, to a 'second bridgehead': those enclaves of empire-minded or imperial-oriented interests in the metropole whose mobilization was crucial to Milner's success in creating the 'moral field' on which Lord Salisbury, to his chagrin, was forced to play. Like the colonial bridgeheads, this domestic bridgehead was a composite of conflicting ideas, preoccupations and material concerns. Its members too had to find collaborators and struggle to exert their influence in an indifferent, occasionally hostile terrain. Sometimes they formed effective alliances with their overseas counterparts, sometimes not.

In terms of future research, this suggests that the lobbying and counter-lobbying waged through newspapers, 'pamphlet wars' and pro-

1. For a suggestive use of this term, see P. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead* (Cambridge, 1988).
2. For Salisbury's views in 1892, see Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 383.

fessional networks to influence domestic opinion on which some valuable pioneering work has been done[1] need to be more fully integrated into the larger picture of imperial expansion. Our knowledge of what might be called the 'information milieu' in which the policy-makers lived is surprisingly limited, as is our understanding of how news from the imperial periphery was gathered, processed and disseminated at home. Equally, closer attention to the ethnographic, micro-economic and topographical characteristics of colonial and semi-colonial bridgeheads might help to explain better why their potential for formal incorporation varied so greatly. The techniques of English local history and even elements of Braudelian 'geohistory' might be usefully pressed into service. Other approaches may also be fruitful. But only by reconstructing more fully the functioning and interaction of these bridgeheads at home and abroad will we be able to explain properly the erratic, unpredictable, tentative, opportunistic but ultimately insatiable progress of Victorian imperialism.

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1. J. S. Galbraith, 'The Pamphlet Campaign in the Boer War', *Journal of Modern History*, xxiv (1952), 111–26, for an early study.