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FROM ANCIENT TO MODERN IN VICTORIAN IMPERIAL THOUGHT*

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ABSTRACT. *This article argues that during the closing decades of the nineteenth century a significant group of British imperial thinkers broke with the long-standing conventions of political thought by deliberately eschewing the inspiration and intellectual authority provided by the examples of the ancient empires. While the early Victorian colonial reformers had looked to the template of Greece, and while many later Victorians compared the empire in India with the Roman empire, numerous proponents of Greater Britain (focusing on the settler colonies, and associated in particular with the movement for imperial federation) looked instead to the United States. I argue that the reason for this innovation, risky in a culture obsessed with the moral and prudential value of precedent and tradition, lies in contemporary understandings of history. Both Rome and Greece, despite their differences, were thought to demonstrate that empires were ultimately self-dissolving; as such, empires modelled on their templates were doomed to eventual failure, whether through internal decay or the peaceful independence of the colonies. Since the advocates of Greater Britain were determined to construct an enduring political community, a global Anglo-Saxon polity, they needed to escape the fate of previous empires. They tried instead to insert Greater Britain into a progressive narrative, one that did not doom them to repeat the failures of the past.*

Rome has consistently provided the inspiration, the imagery and the vocabulary for all the European empires from early modern Spain to late Victorian Britain.[1]

The world has seen many vast and powerful empires, history has recorded their decline, culmination, and fall, but all past experience, varied and instructive as it is, fails to throw much light on the unique problem we are considering.[2]

This article explores some of the ways in which history was drawn upon, and also the ways in which people tried to escape it, in the formulation of imperial political

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[1] Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and empires* (London, 2002), p. 28.

[2] Graham Berry, 'The colonies in relation to the empire', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 18 (1886–7), p. 5.

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thought during the nineteenth century. In so doing, it seeks to complicate our current understanding of both imperial political theory and the character of Victorian historical consciousness. I will be focusing in particular on the passionate debates over the future of 'Greater Britain' – a term employed primarily (though not exclusively or consistently) to denote the unity of the 'mother country' and the settler colonies in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada – which during the last three decades of the century coalesced loosely around the movement for 'imperial federation'.[3] In a political culture obsessed with precedent and the moral value of history and tradition many of the proponents of Greater Britain disavowed the rich intellectual resources of the ancient world, a world that for centuries had played a regulatory function in the imagining of empires. Instead they sought inspiration in the present.

In much European political thought, it had since the Renaissance been standard practice when justifying empire to draw moral and intellectual authority from the writers and historical precedents of the ancient world, either Greece or Rome or sometimes both. It is a historiographical commonplace, moreover, that the late nineteenth-century British empire was conceived frequently, by both its advocates and opponents, in terms of a new Rome.[4] Richard Jenkyns suggests that for the Victorians, when surveying their empire, 'the usual, the inevitable comparison was with Ancient Rome'.[5] 'The parallel between imperial Rome and the British Empire', writes Richard Hingley, became 'increasingly important in the late nineteenth century', and 'the English often identified themselves with the classical Romans'.[6] After noting that Adam Smith began his famous chapter 'Of colonies' in the *Wealth of nations* (1776) with an extended discussion of the classical empires, Richard Faber maintained that the 'late Victorian imperialists

[3] Although the term 'Greater Britain' was initially popularized by Charles Dilke, a sympathetic critic of imperial federation, to encompass the whole of the empire it was quickly adopted by the federalists to describe the settler empire. Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain* (2 vols., London, 1868). For general interpretations of this debate, see Duncan Bell, *The idea of Greater Britain: empire and the future of world order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, forthcoming); Michael Burgess, *The British tradition of federalism* (Leicester, 1995); J. E. Kendle, *Federal Britain* (London, 1997), ch. 3; and Ged Martin, 'Empire federalism and imperial parliamentary union, 1820–1870, *Historical Journal*, 16 (1973), pp. 65–92. For wider uses of the term, see David Armitage, *Greater Britain, 1516–1776* (Aldershot, 2004); and Phiroze Vasunia, 'Greater Rome and Greater Britain', in Barbara Goff, ed., *Classics and colonialism* (London, 2005), pp. 34–68.

[4] Raymond Betts, 'The allusion to Rome in British imperialist thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', *Victorian Studies*, 15 (1971), pp. 149–59; Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and ancient Greece* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 330–46; Andrew Thompson, *Imperial Britain* (London, 2000), p. 18; Linda Colley, 'What is imperial history now?', in David Cannadine, ed., *What is history now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 136; Richard Faber, *The vision and the need* (London, 1966), ch. 1; Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the world* (London, 1995), p. 8; Karma Nabulsi, *Traditions of war* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 115–16; and A. P. Thornton, *The imperial idea and its enemies* (London, 1966), pp. 60–3.

[5] Jenkyns, *The Victorians and ancient Greece*, p. 333.

[6] Richard Hingley, *Roman officers and English gentlemen* (London, 2001), pp. 26, 157. Hingley correctly notes how multifaceted this comparison was, and how this 'flexibility and complexity' (p. 5) helped to ensure the wide popularity of the comparison. See also Norman Vance, *The Victorians and ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1997), ch. 10.

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were heirs to this classical tradition and the same comparisons came readily to mind'.[7] 'If', he argued, 'the *Pax Britannica* was hailed in Latin it was because the *Pax Romana* served as a model for comparison and inspiration'.[8]

In this article I argue that this account is incomplete, and potentially misleading. In elaborating their visions of empire the proponents of Greater Britain almost overwhelmingly eschewed the models presented by both Rome and Greece. Instead they sought inspiration in the new world, regarding America as a model for the future. This was not simply a failure of historical imagination, nor was it a product of intellectual carelessness or political myopia. It represented a conscious break from previous modes of imperial argument. There are two different parts to this story. The first concerns the magnetic attractions of America – or at least the idea of America. In one sense, it offered the most pertinent example of a working federal polity, a dynamic country stretched over a vast territorial expanse and governed by representative institutions. It was the obvious practical template for a federal Greater Britain. Respect was interwoven with apprehension, however, for America was also regarded as a threat to British economic and sometimes even geopolitical superiority, and consequently it acted as one of the original catalysts for the upsurge of interest in the future of the settler empire. Furthermore, the American War of Independence (1775–83) was thought to have burned into British political consciousness important lessons about how best to treat colonists, and the legacy of the revolt helped to mould conceptions of Greater Britain.

There was another side to this story, however, and it is on this that I focus.[9] It concerns the reasons for deliberately exorcizing the rich imaginative resources offered by the ancient world, especially in a culture in which the use of historical precedent was often considered a *sine qua non* of political argument, and in which the classics played such a prominent role.[10] Underpinning the transition from the ancients to the moderns was a set of beliefs about the meaning and direction of history. Drawing on the different but complementary lessons inculcated by interpretations of Greece and Rome, many Victorians believed that empires were self-dissolving. This was a time-honoured argument, but one that was out of step with prevailing conceptions of progress. By the mid-nineteenth century it was commonly believed that history was progressive, at least in the sense that the future was open and that society and polity were shaped by but not doomed to

[7] Faber, *The vision and the need*, p. 19 (see also p. 22). See Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (2 vols., Oxford, 1976), Book IV, chapter VII, pp. 556–8.

[8] Faber, *The vision and the need*, p. 25.

[9] Although I will occasionally refer to reasons why America was considered such an attractive template for the future I will not explore them in depth. For a more detailed account, see Bell, *The idea of Greater Britain*.

[10] Christopher Stray, *Classics transformed* (Oxford, 1998); Robert Ogilvie, *Latin and Greek* (London, 1964); Richard Symonds, *Oxford and the empire* (London, 1986); Jenkyns, *The Victorians and ancient Greece*; and Julia Stapleton, 'Political thought, elites, and the state in modern Britain', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), pp. 251–68, at pp. 254–6.

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recapitulate the past, and that Britain was in the vanguard of this future-oriented developmental trajectory.[11] There were still those who thought that history moved in cycles, including many of the followers of Thomas Arnold in the 1840s and 1850s, but they were exceptions to the rule.[12] Empires, however, exhibited a logic of repeated rise and decline. After all, much of the earlier fascination with historical cycles, especially during the Augustan age, had been based on extrapolations of the political dynamics of the ancient world, and in particular the fall of Rome. In the nineteenth century the vision of cyclical movement remained associated strongly with the polities from which it had been derived originally. Although the history of Europe could be relocated in a progressive narrative, that of the ancients continued to represent a spectacle of eternal return. Empires were found guilty by association.

Since the prevailing assumption underpinning much social and political thought was that 'anything that does not progress is doomed to decline', and since empires stood in the political imagination as the most pertinent concrete examples of declension, Greater Britain had to be yoked to the idea of progress.[13] Its distance from all previous empires had to be established; its novelty affirmed. The ambition was to unite the settler colonies into an integrated and enduring global polity: Greater Britain should be 'permanently welded together'.[14] It should form, argued J. R. Seeley, a 'great and solid World-State'.[15] Given this desire, the long-standing tradition of looking to the ancients to provide intellectual authority for the construction and maintenance of empires had to be overturned, or at least redirected. This is exactly what many of the theorists of Greater Britain attempted, and they did so by reorienting their gaze towards America, shifting the source of inspiration from the past to the present – all in the name of the future. America was to be a substitute, a modern exemplar, offering both a more apposite political structure on which to model Greater Britain, and also, and equally importantly, an imaginative means to escape the dangers heralded by the past. Claims about Britain as a New Rome, even a New Athens, exaggerate and over-simplify the legacy of the ancient world in nineteenth-century political thought.

This is not to suggest that Rome and Greece played insignificant roles in the intellectual life of the late Victorian era. Greece was employed occasionally to present alternative conceptions of empire, as had been common earlier in the century. Rome, meanwhile, was widely utilized as both a model for specific forms of imperial rule and as an antidote to what Benjamin Constant had earlier

[11] John Burrow, Stefan Collini, and Donald Winch, *That noble science of politics* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 15–20, and Essay VI. See also Peter Bowler, *The invention of progress* (Oxford, 1989).

[12] Duncan Forbes, *The liberal Anglican idea of history* (Cambridge, 1952).

[13] The quotation is from H. S. Jones, *Victorian political thought* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 35.

[14] [John Edward Jenkins], 'An imperial confederation', *Contemporary Review*, 17 (1871), pp. 66–7.

[15] J. R. Seeley, *The expansion of England* (London, 1883), p. 169. See here Duncan Bell, 'The Victorian idea of a global state', in Duncan Bell, ed., *Victorian visions of global order* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

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labelled the 'spirit of conquest'.[16] In assessing the imaginative resonance of Rome, however, it is essential to distinguish between claims made about the settler colonies and those made about other elements of the empire. The vast majority of references to Rome concerned British imperial possessions in India.[17] In arguments about the importance of Greater Britain, on the other hand, the ancients almost disappeared from view. The selective erasure of history, and the concomitant turn to America, marked an important break in the history of British imperial thought. This also constituted a significant moment in the Victorian debate over the relationship between past and present, tradition and modernity.

The article unfolds as follows. Section I sets the context for the late Victorian debate by exploring some of the different lessons purportedly taught by Rome and Greece throughout the century, and it highlights the way in which the popularity of the latter was supplanted in the imperial imagination by a resurgence of interest in the former during the closing decades of Victoria's reign. Section II analyses some of the arguments made in favour of Greater Britain, demonstrating their explicit break from both the Greek model of settler colonial rule, which had been widespread earlier in the century, and the late Victorian fascination with the Roman empire. It stresses the way in which they conceived of history and shows how and why they emphasized the irrelevance, even the danger, of classical comparisons. Section III argues that in order to construct a powerful set of arguments about a stable global polity, imperial unionists attempted to establish that the colonial empire was without precedent, at least until the emergence of the United States as an independent country.

I

For a long time the greatness of the ancient world lay with an oppressive weight like an incubus upon the moderns.[18]

In the second of his *Untimely meditations*, Nietzsche observed that the age in which he lived, and in so many ways loathed, was one beholden to the past – it was marked, he wrote, by 'its cultivation of history'. For Nietzsche this was something of which to be 'rightly proud' but simultaneously wary, for escaping history as

[16] Benjamin Constant, 'The spirit of conquest and usurpation and their relation to European civilization' [1814], in Benjamin Constant, *Political writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 51–165.

[17] Although this mode of comparison went back to the eighteenth century, it was perhaps most explicit during the Edwardian era. See, for example, James Bryce, *The ancient Roman empire and the British empire in India* (Oxford, 1914); Evelyn Baring, earl of Cromer, *Ancient and modern imperialism* (London, 1910); and J. A. Cramb, *The origins and destiny of imperial Britain, nineteenth century Europe* (London, 1915). See also the insightful discussions in Javeed Majeed, 'Comparativism and references to Rome in British imperial attitudes to India', in Catherine Edwards, ed., *Roman presences* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 88–110; and Vasunia, 'Greater Rome and Greater Britain' (which focuses on India).

[18] J. R. Seeley, *Introduction to political science*, ed. Henry Sidgwick (London, 1896), p. 161.

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much as for embracing it, for forgetting as much as for remembering, was a precondition of life.[19] Whilst this fascination with the past was widespread in Germany, home to the emergence of the academic discipline of history, it was also pervasive in the country that Nietzsche was so scornful of: Great Britain.[20] One of the most significant manifestations of this historical (even historicized) culture was the way in which understandings of the past played a formative role in the construction, elaboration, and defence of political arguments.[21] The 'English', noted Seeley in 1880, 'guide ourselves in the great political questions by great historical precedents'.[22] This understanding of the function of history was common throughout the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth.

For centuries historical precedents had been employed in British political discourse to defend or dispute assorted ideological standpoints. Interpretations of the ancient world often played a central role. In the seventeenth century, 'neo-roman' conceptions of liberty were recovered, reworked, and deployed in the impassioned debates over the justified scope of monarchical power.[23] During the eighteenth century the multifaceted legacy of Rome, and in particular the ethical and economic messages conveyed by its decline and fall, served as a fertile intellectual resource for a number of otherwise varied developments: oppositional arguments propounded by the English country-party Whigs, the ideological architecture of the American founding, and nascent theories of commercial society, all relied to an extent on interpretations of the fate of the classical polities.[24] In 'Of the study of history' (1741), David Hume observed that one of the several benefits of reading history, 'a most improving part of knowledge', was to be able to 'remark on the rise, progress, declension, and final extinction of the most flourishing of empires'. Knowledge of British history, and the histories of Rome and Greece, was essential he proclaimed. Over a century later, in the opening passage of *On liberty* (1859), J. S. Mill could still single out the histories of Greece, Rome, and 'England', as those 'with which we are earliest familiar'.[25] In the nineteenth century history was regarded as vital for understanding the

[19] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the uses and disadvantages of history for life' [1873], in his *Untimely meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge, 1997), p. 60.

[20] For some typically critical comments about the 'English', see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the genealogy of morality* [1887], ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 11–12.

[21] See John Burrow, *A liberal descent* (Cambridge, 1981); Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, man, and reason* (Baltimore, 1971); and Bowler, *The invention of progress*.

[22] J. R. Seeley, 'Political somnambulism', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 43 (1880), p. 32. This point was still being rehearsed thirty years later: J. Howard Masterman *A history of the British constitution* (London, 1912), p. 1.

[23] Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998); and Quentin Skinner, *Visions of politics* (3 vols., Cambridge, 2002), II.

[24] Caroline Robbins, *Eighteenth-century commonwealthman* (Cambridge, MA, 1959); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment* (Princeton, 1975); and Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of trade* (Cambridge, MA, 2005). See also Philip Ayres, *Classical culture and the idea of Rome in eighteenth century England* (Cambridge, 1997).

[25] David Hume, 'Of the study of history', in David Hume, *Essays, moral, political, and literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 566; and J. S. Mill, *On liberty*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 59.

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moral and political life of the nation, its long and frequently painful evolution over time, and ultimately its fragility. It was 'the common coin' of the epoch, 'the currency of its most characteristic art, the security for its most significant intellectual transactions'.[26] Competing interpretations of critical historical movements and moments, drawn both from the ancient world and from British history itself, inflected debates over the nature of democracy, the toleration of Catholicism and religious dissent, the function of the monarchy, the advancement of liberty, and so forth.[27] Imbued with a heightened appreciation of the unfolding of time – an appreciation derived from the complex interaction between their conception of the direction of history and the latest scientific developments in geology and later biology[28] – and the ethical instruction that could be discerned from it, the Victorians shaped their multiple pasts (and were shaped by them in turn) to suit various ideological purposes. History, along with political economy, comprised the most influential mode of political theorizing of the age.

Theories of empire had always been embedded in wider currents of political thought. In particular, modern European imperialists exhibited an 'imaginative dependence' on Rome.[29] Humanism provided ideological support for justifying global exploration, conquest, and occupation, while arguments derived from the ancient authorities were important also in the debates surrounding the secession of the American colonies.[30] The language of neo-Roman republicanism permeated early and mid-eighteenth-century defences of the British empire, especially in the colonies.[31] The most obvious manifestation of this dependence, though, resided in the frequent reiteration of the classical debate, echoing

[26] Rosemary Jann, *The art and science of Victorian history* (Columbus, 1985), p. xi. History was likewise a major theme in British literature, on which see Philip Davis, *The Oxford English literary history*, VIII: *The Victorians* (Oxford, 2004).

[27] For the role of Greece, see Frank M. Turner, *The Greek heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1981); Jenkyns, *The Victorians and ancient Greece*; Fred Rosen, *Bentham, Byron, and Greece* (Oxford, 1992); and Kyriacos Demetriou, 'In defence of the British constitution: theoretical implications of the debate over Athenian democracy in Britain, 1770–1850', *History of Political Thought*, 17 (1996), pp. 280–97. The case of John Stuart Mill is here instructive: Nadia Urbanati, *Mill on democracy* (Chicago, 2002); and Eugenio Biagini, 'Liberalism and direct democracy: John Stuart Mill and the model of ancient Athens', in Eugenio Biagini, ed., *Citizenship and community* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 21–45. On whiggism, see Burrow, *A liberal descent*; and Mark Francis and John Morrow, *A history of English political thought in the nineteenth-century* (London, 1994), ch. 4. On Gothicism: Roger John Smith, *The gothic bequest* (Cambridge, 1987), ch. 5. On the Stuarts: Timothy Lang, *The Victorians and the Stuart heritage* (Cambridge, 1995).

[28] John Burrow, *Evolution and society* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 149–53; and John Burrow, 'Images of time: from Carlylean vulcanism to sedimentary gradualism', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young eds., *History, religion, and culture* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 198–224.

[29] Pagden, *Lords of all the world*, p. 12. See also Richard Koebner, *Empire* (Cambridge, 1961).

[30] Richard Tuck, *The rights of war and peace* (Oxford, 1999); David Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire* (Cambridge, 2000); Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Humanism and America* (Cambridge, 2003); and Peter Miller, *Defining the common good* (Cambridge, 1994).

[31] Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire*, pp. 181–3. Until the Seven Years War transformed the nature of the empire irrevocably, one strategy employed to avoid the purported lessons of the fall was to stress that the empire was protestant, commercial, maritime, and free, and, as such, not comparable to the political and moral universe of the Romans (p. 10).

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through the centuries, over the corrupting relationship between empire and liberty.[32]

Comparisons between the ancients and the moderns were always ambivalent and highly selective.[33] There was simply too much distance – intellectual, technological, economic, and political – between them for direct replication and emulation. Rather than encouraging straightforward transposition, the imaginative resources generated by the ancient world fed a variety of often conflicting desires and demands in the nineteenth century: it provided inspirational templates for political institutions and, correspondingly, models for virtuous individual behaviour; embodied a long cherished purity of aesthetic forms; reinforced, through the self-conscious elitism of its students and admirers, class, gender, and racial distinctions; and, ultimately, offered an alternative, even alien, world against and through which to measure the present.

For much of the century, Rome played second fiddle to Athens in the British political imagination.[34] Seeley, writing in the early 1880s, suggested that because for much of the century the British looked to the past 'only for a kind of exalted pleasure', and because they sought this pleasure in a whiggish love of the unfolding of liberty, the Roman empire until then was 'thought uninteresting'.

> The Roman Republic was held in honour for its freedom; the earlier Roman Empire was studied for the traces of freedom still discernible in it. But we used to shut the book at the end of the second century, as if all that followed for some ten centuries were decay and ruin; and we did not take up the story again with any satisfaction until the traces of liberty began to reappear in England and in the Italian republics.[35]

It was only when people began to theorize more systematically about the British empire, and to develop arguments about how to administer it effectively in light of the lessons of the past, that Roman imperialism assumed a more prominent position.[36] This is not to suggest that it was entirely absent during the earlier period; Carlyle and Macaulay, for example, were keen to link Britain to the

[32] Pagden, *Lords of all the world*, chs. 1 and 7; and David Armitage, 'Empire and liberty: a republican dilemma', in Martin van Geldren and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism* (2 vols., Cambridge, 2002), II, pp. 29–47.

[33] As P. A. Brunt suggests, comparisons between Britain and Rome were 'forced' at best. P. A. Brunt, *Roman imperial themes* (Oxford, 1990), p. 111.

[34] Hingley, *Roman officers and English gentlemen*, ch. 1; and Miles Taylor, 'Imperium et libertas? Rethinking the radical critique of imperialism during the nineteenth-century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 19 (1991), pp. 1–23, at pp. 4–5.

[35] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, pp. 237–8. For changes over time in the role of the republic, see Frank Turner, 'British politics and the demise of the Roman republic: 1700–1939', *Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), pp. 577–99.

[36] Another reason for decreasing interest in Rome during the early and middle decades of the century was related to the impact of political reform in Britain. As arguments for the role of corruption and oligarchy resonated less, so Rome lost some its centrality. See also Burrow, Collini, and Winch, *That noble science of politics*, pp. 188–9. Conversely, on the relationship between critiques of the liberal state and the increasing popularity of Ceasar in the late Victorian era, see Turner, 'British politics and the demise of the Roman republic'.

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glories of the Roman empire in a manner that, whilst often ambiguous, exerted considerable influence over the later Victorian habit of comparison.[37]

Admiration for aspects of the Greek empire can be seen as an important dimension of the general Hellenism of early and mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Greece figured in at least two separate ways, and although they often overlapped it is essential to distinguish them. The first was as an emblem of creativity and genius. A mythologized picture of the Greek states as spaces for cultural ingenuity and individual freedom was widespread throughout the century. Popular especially amongst some of the romantics, this vision found its most powerful expression in poetry, notably in the preface to Shelley's *Prometheus unbound* (1820).[38] They were not alone in this admiration: French liberals displayed an 'instinctive fondness' for the 'cultural éclat' of Athens.[39] Understood in this manner, Greece offered inspiration but little in the way of detailed political prescription. The importance of this evocative picture led the historian Edward Freeman to claim that one of the great achievements of George Grote's monumental *History of Greece* (1846–56) was the way in which it illuminated the political (and especially institutional) genius of the Greeks, a topic which had long been cast under the shadow of their 'literary' accomplishment.[40]

The second usage was more precise, and referred to specific political institutions. It focused mainly on democracy, but came increasingly to encompass empire. During the early years of the century, Athenian democracy had been employed in political argument as a byword for despotism, constituting a powerful weapon in the Tory intellectual armoury, until in the 1840s Grote's positive appraisal helped reshape the way in which the Greeks were imagined.[41] In this context, an increasing number of imperial commentators looked to Greece as an alternative to Rome. Arthur Mills, a distinguished colonial commentator, wrote in 1856 that the 'model of Colonial policy most frequently and prominently exhibited for the emulation of modern States is that of Greece'. The Greek model, he continued, was that of a 'union resting not on state contrivances and economical theories', like that of Rome, 'but on religious sympathies and ancestral associations'.[42] In particular, this idea appealed to those associated with the vocal 'colonial reform' movement, many of whom were influenced, like Grote himself, by philosophic radicalism. The Roman alternative was, argued

[37] On Macaulay's position, see Burrow, *A liberal descent*, p. 62; and Catherine Edwards, 'Translating empire? Macaulay's Rome', in Edwards, ed., *Roman presences*, pp. 70–87.

[38] Karen O'Brien, 'Poetry against empire: Milton to Shelley', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002), pp. 282–3. See also Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, rebels and reactionaries* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 113–38.

[39] George Armstrong Kelly, *The humane comedy* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 58.

[40] Edward A. Freeman, 'Grote's *History of Greece*', *North British Review*, 25 (1856), p. 142; George Grote, *A History of Greece* (12 vols., London, 1846–56).

[41] See especially Kyriacos N. Demetrious, *George Grote on Plato and Athenian democracy* (Berlin, 1999); and Turner, *The Greek heritage*, pp. 189–204.

[42] Arthur Mills, *Colonial constitutions* (London, 1856), pp. xix–xx. Mills, who was very critical of drawing direct analogies with the ancient world, also noted that Rome was a popular comparator.

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James Mill in 1823, 'so very defective'.[43] The reason for this was that the 'Few' dominated the 'Many' to such an extent that expansion was pursued only in the interests of the aristocratic class. This was an exemplar, and a temptation, to be shunned in the modern world. Mill and a coterie of radical 'reformers' in his wake argued that the Greek style of colonization, premised on peopling distant lands and establishing self-governing communities with strong emotional and cultural ties to the 'mother country', offered a more suitable model to emulate – although they were generally loathe to demand immediate independence for the colonies.[44] In the 1840s John Stuart Mill eulogized the Greek colonies, praising them for 'flourishing so rapidly and so wonderfully' and for guaranteeing freedom, order, and progress, and he argued that they served as an excellent template for British colonization.[45] For the reformers, it was still important to utilize the classics, even when making arguments that were essentially structured by the ultra-modern doctrines of post-Smithian political economy. Admiration for the Greek alternative was also to be found across the political spectrum, notably in the works of W. E. Gladstone – secretary of state for war and the colonies (1845–6) – whose thinking was influenced by Wakefield's notion of 'systematic colonization' and the positive conception of Greek colonialism found in George Cornewall Lewis's *Essay on the government of dependencies* (1841).[46] Whilst the Hellenistic vision circulated during the closing decades of the century, it was less widespread among defenders of the settlement empire, and it all but disappeared from the advocacy of Greater Britain.[47]

During the second half of the century, it became increasingly common to draw comparisons between the British empire and Rome. This was not only true of theoretical texts, it also assumed a central position in the national imagination,

[43] James Mill, 'Colony', *Essays from the supplement to the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Collected works* (London, 1995), p. 4. Mill's views, though, were inconsistent, especially regarding India: Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to empire* (Princeton, 2005), ch. 5.

[44] Mill, 'Colony', pp. 5–9. On other positive comparisons with the Greeks, see also John Arthur Roebuck, *The colonies of England* (London, 1849), pp. 137–41; and, somewhat contrary to his later views, Arthur Mills, *Systematic colonization* (London, 1847), pp. 41–2.

[45] John Stuart Mill, 'Wakefield's "The New British Province of South Australia"', in *The Examiner*, 20 July 1843, reprinted in *The collected works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John Robson (33 vols., Toronto, 1963–91), XXIII, p. 739. On his admiration for the 'Greek empire' see also 'Grote's *History of Greece*', II, *Edinburgh Review*, 93 (1853), *Collected works*, XI, especially pp. 321–4; and 'Grote's *History of Greece*', IV, *Spectator*, 10 Mar. 1859, *Collected works*, XXV, pp. 1128–34.

[46] W. E. Gladstone, *Our colonies* (London, 1855), p. 11. On Gladstone's admiration for the Greek model, see H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874* (Oxford, 1986), p. 74; C. C. Eldridge, *England's mission* (London, 1973), pp. 40–1; and Klaus Knorr, *British colonial theories, 1570–1850* (London, 1963; orig. publ 1944), pp. 310–11n. For Wakefield's views, see his 'Outline of a system of colonization' [1829], in *The collected works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield*, ed. M. F. Lloyd Prichard (Glasgow, 1968), pp. 178–87.

[47] For a rare example of the positive use of the Greeks by an imperial federalist, see Sir Frederick Young, *On the political relations of mother countries and colonies* (London, 1883), pp. 3–4. Miles Taylor suggests that Dilke also adopted this view: Miles Taylor, 'Republics versus empires: Charles Dilke's republicanism reconsidered', in David Nash and Anthony Taylor, eds., *Republicanism in Victorian society* (Stroud, 2003), p. 32.

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encoded in administrative practices and even cityscapes. Among the design mottoes submitted by hopeful candidates in the architectural competition for the new Foreign Office (later expanded to include the India Office) in the mid-1850s, were 'Arcana Imperii', 'Pro Regina et Patria semper', 'Potentatus et gloria', and 'Rome was not built in a day'.[48] In India British officials were routinely artistically represented in classical poses and dress.[49] The lessons to be learnt from the ancients, and especially the Romans, became a fixture in the entrance exams for the Indian civil service.[50] The earl of Carnarvon, formerly a tory secretary of state for the colonies, argued in 1878 that the only comparable precedent for the vast expanses of the British empire was Rome.[51] He was far from alone. For many individuals Britain was *Imperium Britannicum*, whether for good or ill.

The proponents of Greater Britain tended not to follow this trend, for reasons that will be examined in the next section. There were nevertheless exceptions to this rule, the most prominent being the historian J. A. Froude, whose wistful nostalgia for the lost glories of the English past crystallized in a reworking of Britain as a new Rome.[52] But the reasons for the direction of Froude's historical gaze are revealing, for his political vision was structured by a conception of history that distanced him from most other imperial unionists. Instead of according with the largely progressive cosmology of his peers, it drew from and modified the ideas of his mentor, Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle combined a 'Hebraic-Christian pattern of idolatry and retribution' with German idealist philosophy to provide a post-Romantic cyclical conception of history.[53] History was a story of recurrent decline and fall, destructive, vituperative, punitive. Froude's vision was less violent, but the temporal structure remained largely intact – although it should be noted that he was inconsistent on this point, as ideas about the progressive nature of the age in which he lived kept creeping back into his writing.[54] Two lessons from the comparison with Rome were drawn by both men: the first was that England was in danger of falling prey to the decline that had claimed the glories of Rome; the second was a belief in the necessity of Britain picking up the imperial mantle that Rome had thrown down. In *Oceana*

[48] G. Alex Bremner, 'Nation and empire in the government architecture of mid-Victorian London: the Foreign and India Office reconsidered', *Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), p. 722. For other examples, see Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900* (London, 1999), pp. 17–18.

[49] Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge* (Princeton, 1996), p. 30. However, classical imperial architecture in India, dominant in the first half of the century, rapidly lost its appeal in the wake of 1857. Thomas Metcalf, *An imperial vision* (London, 1989), pp. 1–18.

[50] Heather Ellis, 'Proconsuls, guardians, and great men: the Indian Civil Service and an education in empire', unpublished paper, University of Oxford, 2003; and Phiroze Vasunia, 'Greek, Latin, and the Indian civil service', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 51 (2005), pp. 35–69.

[51] Henry Herbert, earl of Carnarvon, 'Imperial administration', *Fortnightly Review*, 24 (1878), p. 759.

[52] J. A. Froude, *Oceana, or England and her colonies* (London, 1886).

[53] Burrow, *A liberal descent*, p. 253. On Froude's challenge to the prevailing belief in progress see 'On progress', *Fraser's Magazine*, 2 (1870), pp. 671–91.

[54] See, for example, J. A. Froude, 'The science of history' [1864], in his *Short studies on great subjects* (London, 1877), III, pp. 1–25.

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(1886) Froude observed that two centuries earlier James Harrington had discerned the shadow of Roman decline falling across England, as the people flocked from the countryside to the city.[55] The possibility of such degeneration was once again apparent: 'the fate of Rome seemed to me likely to be the fate of England if she became what the political economists desired to see her'.[56] Carlyle, in both *Chartism* (1840) – where he wrote that 'Romans are dead out, English are come in'[57] – and in *Past and present* (1843), talked of the English assuming the Roman imperial role. Froude adopted this lesson. On the one hand, Rome offered the embodiment of the very pattern of history itself, of rise and decline. On the other, it presented a picture of a vigorous and powerful empire. The tension between the two visions – which are essentially slices taken at different times in an historical cycle – inflected the imperial writings of both. But Froude was an exception amongst the advocates of Greater Britain. Few of them believed in the inevitability conveyed by such a temporal model. James Bryce, president of the Oxford branch of the Imperial Federation League (IFL), expressed a widely held sentiment when he wrote that the 'movement of humanity is not, as the ancients fancied, in cycles, but shows a sustained, though often interrupted, progress'.[58]

The historical narratives of imperial legitimacy generated during the nineteenth century were more complex and more contested than many recent commentators seem to allow. The manner in which classical models and illustrations were employed demonstrated both continuity and change. The ancients were still drawn upon in defending certain modes of expansive empire building and forms of despotic political rule, by both those who wanted to attack the policies of the government and those who sought to offer them support. In imagining the discrete elements of the settler empire there was, however, a striking fracture in the foundations of intellectual authority. Imperial federation was, the marquis of Lorne proclaimed, 'a phrase representing an altogether new idea in the history of nations', and there was 'no precedent which may help us'.[59]

[55] James Harrington, *The commonwealth of Oceana, and, a system of government*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1992).

[56] Froude, *Oceana*, pp. 10 and 8–9. On Froude's republicanism, see Bell, *The idea of Greater Britain*, ch. 3.

[57] Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism*, in *Selected writings*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 202.

[58] James Bryce, 'An age of discontent', *Contemporary Review*, 59 (1891), p. 29. See also J. R. Seeley, 'Ethics and religion', *Fortnightly Review*, 45 (1889), p. 514; and J. R. Seeley, 'Georgian and Victorian expansion', *Fortnightly Review*, 42 (1887), p. 124; and most famously, John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on representative government* (London, 1961), p. 26. Whilst the view that ancient conceptions of history were cyclical was prominent in the nineteenth century, this was not actually the view held (at least in a straightforward sense) by any ancient writers. See Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Time in ancient historiography', in his *Essays in ancient and modern historiography* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 179–205. They did not, however, have any conception of progress. I thank Oswyn Murray for this reference.

[59] John Douglas Sutherland, marquis of Lorne, *Imperial federation* (London, 1885), pp. 43 and 2; see also [Arthur Elliot], 'Colonial and imperial federation', *Edinburgh Review*, 192 (1900), p. 270; and [Urquart Forbes], 'Britannic confederation and colonisation', *London Quarterly Review*, 19 (1893), pp. 250–1.

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Displaying the pride in novelty common at the time, as well as the frequent inability to escape entirely a highly connotative historical vocabulary, a contributor to the *Westminster Review* wrote that 'History affords no parallel to the position of the British Empire. Great Britain stands *facile princeps* among nations.'[60] This deliberate distancing from history – or at least an aspect previously considered vital – was a remarkable course to chart in a culture obsessed with heeding the purported lessons of the past. The Victorian debate over Greater Britain signals an important switch in the nature of British imperial political thought: the turn from the ancients to the moderns as sources of intellectual, political, and moral inspiration.

II

There is no analogy in the condition of any nation in the past which can guide us in estimating the forces at work within our Empire.[61]

Late Victorian imperial discourse was not brimming with detailed analyses of ancient history. Unlike those of Bruni and Machiavelli, Montesquieu or Beaufort, Smith or Hume, the historical writings of the imperial commentators were neither methodical nor particularly insightful. Scholarly work on the ancient empires was being produced in the universities – ancient history was a burgeoning and increasingly professional academic subject, although it still laboured under the shadow of Theodor Mommsen – but the popular notion of decline and fall, and the imagery associated with the history of empires in general, was a vague trope.[62] It conveyed a stark, simple message: 'The long annals of the world are but a record of the rise and fall of successive empires.'[63] The combination of analytical ambiguity and narrative simplicity helps explain its wide resonance amongst contemporaries. Indeed, the imagery of decline and fall played

[60] [Anon.], 'The federation of the British empire', *Westminster Review*, 128 (1887), p. 484. The Latin phrase 'facile princeps' could mean simply, following Cicero, 'indisputably first' or 'leading' (or, indeed, the leader of a state). However, it also had a more specific meaning, namely the title under which Augustus Cæsar and his successors exercised supreme authority in the Roman Empire.

[61] Lorne, *Imperial federation*, p. 2.

[62] At Oxford, the spiritual and intellectual home of classics in Britain, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the 'zenith of Greats', though ancient history only achieved prominence in the teaching of Literae Humaniores in the last two decades of the century, and even then little original and lasting scholarship was produced; it remained largely derivative of Mommsen, whose majestic *History of Rome* was translated into English in 1862–6, and soon became the standard text (this was followed in 1886 by his *Provinces of the Roman empire*). The main focus of teaching and research in Roman history, following Mommsen's lead, lay in the study of the early empire and the late republic, and in the practices of imperial administration; only in 1903 was the study of the empire formally established as a period of instruction for undergraduates. The study of ancient Greek history was a poor relative to the study of the Roman world. See W. H. Walsh, 'The zenith of greats', and especially Oswyn Murray, 'Ancient history, 1872–1914', in M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys, eds., *The history of the University of Oxford* (Oxford, 2000), VII, pp. 311–26 and 333–60.

[63] [John Robinson], 'The future of the British empire', *Westminster Review*, 38 (1870), p. 74. Robinson, a keen imperial federalist, was a politician and journalist in Natal.

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an important role in what I have elsewhere labelled the 'iconographic order' of Greater Britain, the imaginative system of symbols, stirring rituals, and nebulous (often poetic) imagery that provided a coherent and emotive picture of a shared past, a troubled present, and a glorious future.[64]

The political uses of imperial history came in two basic forms, one general, the other specific. The former sought to argue, using various examples of imperial rise and decline, that all empires followed the same trajectory; that they all eventually collapsed. This was the central theme of Viscount Bury's *Exodus of the Western nations* (1865), a treatise cautioning that the British must urgently prepare to cede their colonies because fighting historical inevitability would be disastrous.[65] Counselling vigilance and critical of aggressive expansion, Goldwin Smith warned that the 'decay of Empires is the theme of history'.[66] The Tory MP C. E. Howard Vincent advised that 'there is but too much ground to fear that unless within the course of the next few years a chain of connection can be forged, the fate of the great empires of Greece and Rome, of Portugal and Spain, no less than of Holland, will attend us, if we refuse to recognize the condition of things as they are to-day'.[67] History taught, then, that empires followed a discernible pattern.

The second usage, which tended to draw on either Greece or Rome, looked instead at specific cases to illustrate the political dynamics that catalysed the fall. The Romans and the Greeks presented the Victorians with two different models of self-dissolution, although they were rarely delineated clearly. The first, and probably the most powerful, was the belief that the drive for expansion inevitably led to disaster. This view had been formulated most powerfully, at least in modern European thought, by Machiavelli, who, drawing on the history of Rome as mediated by both Sallust and Polybius, had argued in Book II of his *Discourses on Livy* that states would seek to expand inexorably, but that in so doing would forfeit their liberty, collapsing under the moral and constitutional strain of the quest for *grandezza*.[68] This was to become a commonplace view in the following centuries, and many of the critics of bellicose empire-building, including Montesquieu, Hume, Kant, and Constant, pointed to the moral and physical collapse of Rome, warning of a comparable fate for those who pursued rapacious military policies.[69]

[64] D. Bell, 'The idea of a patriot queen? The monarchy, the constitution, and the iconographic order of Greater Britain, 1860–1900', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31 (2006), pp. 1–19.

[65] William Keppel, Viscount Bury, *Exodus of the Western nations* (2 vols., London, 1865).

[66] Goldwin Smith, 'The policy of aggrandizement', *Fortnightly Review*, 22 (1877), p. 307.

[67] Howard Vincent, 'The British empire to-day', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 16 (1884–5), p. 323.

[68] Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, ed. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, 1997), II. See also Armitage, 'Empire and liberty', pp. 29–45; and Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and empire* (Cambridge, 2004). In general, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion, Vol. 3* (Cambridge, 2003), especially Parts III–V.

[69] See also H. V. Bowen, 'British conceptions of global empire, 1756–83', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 26 (1998), pp. 1–27, at p. 8; and Taylor, 'Imperium et libertas?' p. 13.

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The reasons for, and consequences of, the collapse of Rome under the weight of its own expansive impulse had been imprinted further into British consciousness by the epic work of Edward Gibbon.[70] The trope of declension was also common in the literature and art of the nineteenth century, resulting in a fascination with what Karen O'Brien labels 'proleptic nostalgia', the intimation of the future collapse of civilization, of Britain as a fragile and ultimately doomed empire, enunciated most eloquently in Tennyson's melancholy *Idylls of the King* (1859).[71]

There were at least three analytically separable interpretations of the fall of Rome in widespread circulation, although they were often conflated. First, as noted above, there were those who argued that Rome collapsed due to the corrupting power of luxury and the subsequent loss of virtue. This account was prominent especially amongst radical critics of empire who stressed the potential dangers of aristocratic nabobs returning from colonial service and threatening British political virtue with foreign flavoured vice. 'Is it not just possible', asked Richard Cobden in 1860, 'that we may become corrupted at home by the reaction of arbitrary political maxims in the East upon our domestic politics, just as Greece and Rome were demoralized by their contact with Asia?'[72] This had been a theme in British debates over empire at least since Burke's dogged pursuit of Warren Hastings. A second account argued that overextension, war, and institutional paralysis were the primary causes. This had been an argument central to Montesquieu's pathbreaking *Considerations on the causes of the greatness of the Romans and their decline* (1734), and its critique of the consequences of adventurous militarism, and the usually conjoined deficit of commercial and productive spirit, could be found regularly in late Victorian political discourse.[73] Seeley, for instance, was scathing about the failings of the Roman 'military character'. Greater Britain was commercial and productive, creative and

[70] Edward Gibbon, *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire*, ed. David Womersley (3 vols., Harmondsworth, 1995 [1766–78]). On the popularity of the trope of decline and fall, see Vance, *The Victorians and ancient Rome*, pp. 234–5; and his 'Decadence and the subversion of empire', in Edwards, ed., *Roman presences*, pp. 110–24; Hingley, *Roman officers and English gentlemen*, ch. 3; and Jenkyns, *The Victorians and ancient Greece*, pp. 73–7.

[71] O'Brien, 'Poetry against empire'. See also Matthew Reynolds, *The realms of verse, 1830–1870* (Oxford, 2001), ch. 9; Vance, *The Victorians and ancient Rome*, pp. 335–6; Burrow, *A liberal descent*, pp. 68–9; and Catherine Edwards and Michael Liversidge, eds., *Imagining Rome* (London, 1996). As John Mackenzie observes, the Victorian fascination with the classical world 'gave them a sense of a coming nemesis'. John Mackenzie, 'Empire and the global gaze', in John Mackenzie, ed., *The Victorian vision* (London, 2001), p. 253.

[72] Cobden, cited in Knorr, *British colonial theories*, p. 359. See also Frederic Seebohm, 'Imperialism and socialism', *Nineteenth Century*, 7 (1880), pp. 726–36; Taylor, 'Imperium et libertas?'; and Burrow, Collini, and Winch, *That noble science of politics*, p. 190.

[73] In his later *L'espirit des lois* (1748) Montesquieu offered a resounding defence of the British model of maritime commercial empire, a counterpoint to the alternative territorial militaristic system which had ended in the collapse of liberty at Rome. Charles de Secondat, Baron Montesquieu, *The sprit of the laws*, trans. Anne Cohler, Carolyn Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge, 1989), ch. 27, Book xiii.

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vigorous, taming nature and generating wealth, whereas the Romans, despite their military prowess, did not know how to make constructive use of the lands they governed.[74] And finally, it was argued that the over-centralization of Roman institutions, and the concentration of power in the hands of the few, led to eventual collapse. Bernard Holland, in his evocatively titled *Imperium et libertas* (1901), argued that small 'nations' were perfectly suited for ingenuity, and that a decentralized federal empire could simultaneously exhibit great strength while ceding considerable autonomy to its constituent units. Rome, on the other hand, had been destroyed by the degeneration brought about through centralization. With an eye on the future, he concluded that 'the failure of the Roman experiment does not prove that an empire which avoided this peril might not beneficially endure for a much longer period'.[75]

History, however, was rarely transparent. John Bright once castigated the IFL for not heeding the obvious lessons of history, to which W. E. Forster, the president of the IFL, replied, 'Yes, but history teaches many lessons now-a-days, and they follow so fast one upon another that it is not always easy to learn from them.'[76] For some, it taught that the empire would unavoidably come to an end. Critics of the empire seized upon the imagery of Roman decline, of vulnerability in the midst of apparent strength.[77] However, as long as the eventual end of empire was projected into an indeterminate but ideally distant future, it was not necessarily to be feared, as for many the empire was a tutelary and hence temporary structure: once the various elements were ready for 'self-government' and had reached the requisite level of 'civilization' the British parent could (in the common familial metaphor of the time) let the child loose upon the world. This was likely to happen first for the 'settler' colonies, and over a more distant horizon for the 'barbarous' elements; but the time would come nevertheless.

For most of the proponents of a Greater British polity such a view of the future, tied as it was to an understanding of the past, was unacceptable – at least for the settler colonies. Rather than emphasizing the invariable fate of the empire, Roman decline convinced them that Britain had to learn from and surpass the ancients in order to secure future greatness. They had to defy history, shape it to

[74] J. R. Seeley, 'Roman imperialism, II: the fall of the Roman empire', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 20 (1869), p. 54. Although he noted the role played by the 'moral decay' generated by excess luxury in the fall of Rome, Seeley argued that the main problem was the lack of military manpower brought about by over-ambitious extension ('Roman imperialism, II', pp. 47–8). He was not, however, consistent on this point, for a decade later he was arguing that the 'Empire of Rome was undermined by moral decay'. J. R. Seeley, *Natural religion* (London, 1882), p. 237.

[75] Bernard Holland, *Imperium et libertas* (London, 1901), pp. 13–14. John Morley also criticized the centralization of imperial federal plans: 'The expansion of England', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 49 (1884), pp. 241–52, at p. 258.

[76] W. E. Forster, 'A few more notes on imperial federation', *Nineteenth Century*, 17 (1885), p. 553.

[77] Smith, 'The policy of aggrandizement', p. 308. See also, Morley, 'The expansion of England', p. 258.

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their political will. Montagu Burrows, Professor of History at Oxford, warned that the

> danger of our not perceiving our real position is exactly the same as was experienced by the old Roman Empire. The decay of the centre gradually makes its way to the extremities; and these drop off, one by one, till the seat of the Empire itself, unprotected and forlorn, goes down in the general crash.[78]

'With the secession of the Colonies', warned Edward Salmon, 'would begin the decline and fall of the British Empire.'[79] Without educating the British people (and especially the working classes) about the importance of the colonies, one Colonel Arbuthnot commented, 'I fear it will not be long before some historian will have to undertake the melancholy duty of chronicling the Decline and Fall of the British Empire.'[80] Pointing to Macaulay's famous passage about a future London devoured by flames, another ardent imperial unionist cautioned against the loss of empire, concluding that the 'legend of Nero fiddling while Rome was burning, then, no longer will be the supreme instance of imperial folly and infatuation'.[81] The grandeur of the present, he implied, would crumble to dust without radical action. It is not the least significant irony of the movement for imperial federation that Gibbon's centenary fell in 1894, the year after the IFL was dissolved.

An alternative conception of political termination was associated with the Greek model of colonization. 'The ancient Greek city', explained Holland,

> when its population became too large for its rocky island or edge of mainland shore, sent out a colony as a beehive sends out a swarm. The colonists took possession of a new territory and there built a city, maintaining a pious regard, except when interests clashed, for the Mother City, but not a true political connection.[82]

This system, noted Seeley, 'gives complete independence to the colony, but binds it in perpetual alliance'.[83] Freeman, one of the most ferocious critics of imperial federation, argued that modern European colonies, including and perhaps especially the British, had much in common with their Greek predecessors, with one crucial exception: they were not *ab initio* independent. Under the Greek system, the 'metropolis claimed at most a certain filial respect, a kind of religious reverence, which was for the most part freely given'. As such, imperial unionists had no precedent on which to draw. 'Let us at least remember that what is proposed is unlike anything that ever happened in the world before.'[84] Bryce

[78] Montagu Burrows, 'Imperial federation', *National Review*, 4 (1884–5), p. 369.

[79] Edward Salmon, 'Imperial federation: the condition of progress', *Fortnightly Review*, 58 (1900), p. 1011.

[80] Colonel Arbuthnot, comments in *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 12 (1880–1), p. 370.

[81] [Urquart Forbes], 'Imperial federation', *London Quarterly Review*, 64 (1885), pp. 331–2. Macaulay, who detested Gibbon, concurred with him on the iconography of decline.

[82] Holland, *Imperium et libertas*, pp. 13–14. [83] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, p. 69, and also p. 38.

[84] E. A. Freeman, 'Imperial federation', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 51 (1885), pp. 436 and 437–8. See also E. A. Freeman, *History of Federal Government* (London, 1863), pp. 5–26.

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observed in an obituary note that such reasoning underpinned Freeman's scathing criticisms of the empire:

> he disliked all schemes for drawing the colonies into closer relations with the United Kingdom, and even seemed to wish that they should sever themselves from it, as the United States had done. This view sprang partly from his feeling that they were very recent acquisitions, with which the old historic England had nothing to do, partly also from the impression made on him by the analogy of the Greek colonies. He appeared to think that the precedent of those settlements showed the true and proper relation between a 'metropolis' and her colonies to be not one of political interdependence, but of cordial friendship and a disposition to render help, nothing more.[85]

This immersion in the life of the past helps explain Freeman's vehement opposition to the movement for federation. The typical federalist riposte was equally adamant; as Forster wrote, in his reply to Bright, 'This is not the time for alarm at novelties; the air is full of them … Let us be as little enslaved by precedent in our colonial policy as in our domestic legislation.'[86] Lord Rosebery, another president of the IFL, also stressed the need to escape from the prison house of imperial history. In a speech delivered in Sydney in December 1883 he distanced the British empire from both Rome and Greece, and pleaded with his audience:

> I will ask you only to remember one thing in your dealings with the old country, as I wish statesmen in the old country to remember it in their dealings with you. It is that neither you nor they should reason too much from precedent or from history. It has made its own history; it is creating its own precedent, it is steering its path into the future, where no chart and compass can guide it.

This was a theme he reiterated in Adelaide in January 1884. The future of mankind, he stressed, lay in the hands of the British 'race' (including America); yet the future was sometimes shackled by perceptions of past failure. The empire should not be allowed to stagnate, for 'let me remind this assemblage of the fact – that empires, and especially great empires, when they crumble at all, are apt to crumble exceedingly small'.[87]

The 'Greek model' was also invoked when another eighteenth-century image was employed, namely Turgot's metaphor of ripe colonial fruits falling from their parent tree. The argument here was that when colonies reached maturity, as they invariably would, separation was inevitable and should not be impeded. The conservative federalist Sir Samuel Wilson, mixing his models, wrote that, '[h]istory tells us that colonies are founded, grow, and mature, until, like ripe fruit, they fall from the parent tree, like the colonies of ancient Greece and

[85] James Bryce, 'Edward Augustus Freeman', *English Historical Review*, 7 (1892), p. 502. On the sparring between Freeman and Bryce over federation, see Freeman's letters to Bryce, especially those on 16 Dec. 1886, 7 Feb. 1887, and 11 Nov. 1889, all in *The life and letters of Edward A. Freeman*, ed. W. R. W. Stephens (2 vols., London, 1895), II, pp. 256, 359, 411.

[86] W. E. Forster, 'Imperial federation', *Nineteenth Century*, 17 (1885), p. 217.

[87] Rosebery, speech in Sydney, 10 Dec. 1883, and speech in Adelaide, 18 Jan. 1884; reprinted in George Bennett, ed., *The concept of empire* (London, 1953), pp. 281–2 and 284.

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Rome, or the American colonies of many European nations'.[88] There was, however, a way to circumvent this deadly sequence, he insisted, and that was to learn the lessons of the American debacle, to federate in order to unite permanently.[89]

Seeley returned frequently to Turgot's argument, which he considered essential to refute.[90] For Seeley, the secession of the American colonies had taught British statesmen and historians the wrong lesson about the nature of colonial empires, indeed it had left 'a faint and confused impression upon the national memory'. It had taught them that the Turgotian refrain was an inviolable law of history. 'I think then that we mistake the moral of the American Revolution when we infer from it that all colonies – and not merely colonies of religious refugees under a bad colonial system – fall off from the tree as soon as they ripen'.[91] The American colonies revolted for specific historical reasons, their secession the result of 'temporary conditions, removable, and which have been removed'. It was essential that misleading historical analogies did not blind people to the novel form of Greater Britain.[92]

There is yet another reason why the ancients could offer little guidance. For the Greek and Roman philosophers the moral and political universe was defined largely by the walls of the city or city-state (*polis, civitas*). These walls marked both the beginning and, in a sense, the end of political association; in so doing they sorted the inhabitants of the world into citizen and non-citizen, civilized and barbarian. This understanding of the ideal spatial configuration of ethico-political life was translated into the modern world by the Renaissance retrieval of ancient learning and it was reiterated, albeit often obliquely, in the political theories that emerged from the Italian city-states. It formed a central part of the intellectual heritage of Europe. Republicanism in particular was associated with the defence of a highly circumscribed political sphere, and this was to have a significant impact on the development of imperial ideologies.[93] But once again, such an understanding of the ideal nature of political life could not be accommodated to the geographical realities of Greater Britain. Rome offered little inspiration

[88] Sir Samuel Wilson, 'Imperial federation', p. 380. For the metaphor of ripe fruits, see also Dalton, 'The federal states of the world', *Nineteenth Century*, 16 (1884), pp. 116–17; and J. H. Muirhead, 'What imperialism means' [1900] reprinted in *The British idealists*, ed. David Boucher (Cambridge, 1997), p. 240.

[89] Wilson, 'Imperial federation', p. 380.

[90] Turgot used the phrase repeatedly. Seeley may well have picked it up from his 'Tableau philosophique des progres successifs de l'esprit humain' [1750], which was published in an edition by Dupont de Nemours in the early nineteenth century. See *Oeuvres de Turgot*, ed. Gustave Schelle, I (Paris, 1913), p. 222: 'Les colonies sont comme des fruits qui ne tiennent a l'arbre que jusqu'à leur maturité; devenues suffisantes à elles-même, elle firent ce que fit depuis Carthage, ce que fera un jour l'Amérique'. I thank Emma Rothschild for this pointer.

[91] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, pp. 15, 256, 17, 155.

[92] Ibid., pp. 16, 297, and Lecture VIII.

[93] See Pagden, *Lords of all the world*, pp. 17–24; and Judith Sklar, 'Montesquieu and the new republicanism', in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, eds., *Machiavelli and republicanism* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 265–81. On the role of late eighteenth-century ideas about the civility of 'inland' cities, derived partly from Cicero's writings on Rome, see Emma Rothschild 'Language and empire, c. 1800', *Historical Research*, 78 (2005), pp. 208–29, at p. 215.

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or consolation. Not only did it demonstrate that empire and liberty were irreconcilable, it also seemed to suggest that political life was pursued best in confined spaces, indeed that this was the only possible locus of civilization. Such an understanding was certainly compatible with the imperial conquests in India and Africa, for not only did many of the British governing elite live in anglicized urban enclaves but their mission, and their conception of the ends of empire, were often very different. For those intent on securing a permanent Greater Britain, it was entirely inappropriate. The colonial outposts of Greater Britain, whilst studded with emerging towns and even some large metropolitan areas, were still largely rural, and vast oceans separated the various territorial elements of the empire, its lands stretched out over continental expanses. Once again, the ancients seemed to teach little, except insofar as they suggested that the political order of which the (British) moderns were so proud was unsuitable, even flawed fundamentally. It is little wonder that the imperial unionists looked instead across the Atlantic, and that the emotive archetype of the rugged American frontier replaced the restricted space of the *urbis* as the site of political desire. Moral regeneration – modern *virtú* – was to be found, or at least sought, on the expansive imperial frontier.[94] Combined with a character discourse that stressed the elevating properties of colonialism, this understanding of the settler empire as a politically and morally transformative association underpinned the theoretical arguments for Greater Britain.

The widely held conceptions of the meaning of history help to explain the degree of anxiety that the future status of the empire generated during the 1860s, and throughout the years of the agitation for imperial union. Proponents of Greater Britain were convinced from the outset that they were racing against time itself. The ancients, and in particular Rome, offered a series of perturbing lessons, providing them with a compelling reason to distance themselves from the past. Their ambition was to create a *permanent* Greater British polity. 'The essential thing', William Gisborne stressed, 'is to weld together the constitutional parts of the Empire into one harmonious whole, so as to render their separation, humanly speaking, impossible.'[95] The empire had therefore to escape the clutches of time that Polybius and Sallust had illuminated two millennia previously, and that Gibbon and Macaulay, amongst others, had reinjected into the political imagination. It also had to avoid the calls of inevitable independence heralded by the ancient Greeks. Its fate had somehow to be brought under control, steered back within the province of human agency. As the historian and imperial federalist

[94] On the importance of the frontier (and also its link to Britishness) in the ideology of the settlers, see Alan Lester, 'British settler discourse and the circuits of empire', *History Workshop Journal*, 54 (2002), pp. 25–48; and Alan Lester, *Imperial networks* (London, 2001).

[95] William Gisborne, 'Colonisation', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 20 (1888–9), p. 58. See also Forster, 'Imperial federation', p. 553; Seeley, 'Georgian and Victorian expansion', p. 139; Francis De Labillière, *Federal Britain* (London, 1894), p. vi; and [Jenkins], 'An imperial confederation', pp. 66–7.

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Hugh Egerton cautioned, 'It is at once the glory and the responsibility of nations that in their case, no ceaseless law of change is operating, to make dissolution and decay inevitable. To each generation, in its turn, is given the privilege and power to shape its own destinies'.[96] It was necessary therefore to conceive of alternative ways of thinking about the empire.

III

This reimagining was attempted by emphasizing the historical distinctiveness of Greater Britain. Other empires, whether ancient or modern, had been motivated by profit and retained through brute force, but the British, whilst militarily powerful and perhaps guilty of past excesses, were driven by more lofty ideals. Or so it was claimed. Bryce suggested that the British empire was unique due to the fact that its colonies were so scattered.[97] Given this geographical spread, not even his beloved America offered a straightforward comparison, although Bryce, typically, considered it the most useful example from which to learn. For Francis de Labillière, honorary secretary of the IFL and tireless advocate of a global 'Federal Britain', the United States and the Victorian empire were exceptions to the patterns of history because their 'very existence' was not based on the employment of force.[98] They were not empires in any traditional sense, he continued, and consequently they did not fall under the embrace of the same historical logic. Drawing on one of the most powerful arguments used to highlight the radical novelty of the Victorian era, the honorary secretary of the Royal Colonial Institute observed that the 'oceanus dissociabilis' objection to governing political communities across expanses of water, drawn originally from antiquity, re-iterated famously by Edmund Burke, and pervasive well into the nineteenth century, 'is a Roman, not an English idea'. The 'ocean steamship and the submarine cable have', he boasted, 'annihilated distance'.[99] A new world had dawned, and the ancient models were no longer pertinent.

For Seeley, the former Professor of Latin and editor of Livy, the ancients offered no lessons for the 'boundless expanses' of Greater Britain.[100] He was a great admirer of the classical world, arguing that much could be learnt from it. 'I feel more at home at Rome in the times of Cicero', he wrote, 'than at Paris in the disturbances of the Fronde.'[101] Historical analogies, however, had to be

[96] H. E. Egerton, *A short history of colonial policy* (London, 1897), p. 478.

[97] Bryce, comments in the *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 24 (1892–3), p. 124.

[98] De Labillière, *Federal Britain*, p. 199.

[99] C. W. Eddy, 'What are the best means of drawing together the interests of the United Kingdom and the colonies', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 3 (1875–6), p. 9. This was a central theme in late Victorian imperial thought: Duncan S. A. Bell, 'Dissolving distance: technology, space, and empire in British political thought, 1770–1900', *Journal of Modern History*, 77 (2005), pp. 523–63.

[100] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, pp. 38–43.

[101] J. R. Seeley, 'The teaching of politics', in his *Lectures and essays* (London, 1870), p. 301.

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appropriate. Whilst the Greeks and the Romans offered contrasting models of imperialism, neither was relevant for mapping the future of Greater Britain. Seeley warned that viewing Britain as an heir to Rome, a tendency he detected amongst many of his compatriots, was a serious error.[102] It is thus a mistake to claim that his imperial vision was inspired by, or modelled on, the history of Rome.[103] In *The expansion of England* he argued that 'Our colonies do not resemble the colonies which classical students meet with in Greek and Roman history, and our Empire is not an Empire at all in the ordinary sense of the word.'[104] There were various reasons for this difference, including the purported racial and cultural homogeneity – the 'ethnological unity' – of the Greater British population and the development of new communications technologies facilitating global concord.[105] Greater Britain was instead a 'world-state' and as such it should be compared to the United States.[106] This did not mean, however, that the classical world failed to offer Seeley any insights into the patterns of contemporary international politics, for the Roman archetype, he argued, bore some resemblance to the British mode of rule in India. Whilst the analogy was far from exact – a key difference was indicated by the geographical fact that India was not contiguous with Britain, and thus the territorial transmission belts which had led to the corruption of metropolitan Rome were absent – they did share the status of 'superior races' intent not only on ruling, but on 'civilizing' those under their control.[107] As the Roman empire in the West was 'the empire of civilisation over barbarism', so the British empire in India was 'the empire of the modern world over the medieval'.[108] In their civilizational superiority over the conquered the two empires were, he suggested, of the same 'type', despite considerable practical differences. Nevertheless, such comparisons had nothing to do with the settlement colonies.

Another key difference between past and present, and one of the primary reasons to avoid deriving lessons from the former in order to analyse the latter, concerned the status and limits of freedom. Once again, this was an issue raised

[102] J. R. Seeley, 'Introduction' to *Her majesty's colonies* (London, 1886), p. xviii.

[103] For the argument that Seeley saw the British as heirs to Rome, see Reba Soffer, 'History and religion: J. R. Seeley and the burden of the past', in R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter, eds., *Religion and irreligion in Victorian society* (London, 1992), pp. 142–3; and Hingley, *Roman officers and English gentlemen*, pp. 24–5. Both of these interpretations are incorrect, at least when referring to his (far more influential) writings from the early 1880s onwards. Note, however, that Seeley's view on the identity of the empire had changed from his more ambivalent position in the early 1870s. If 'we should at some future time cease be its Rome', he suggested in 1872, it would be best if the British could ideally 'remain its Athens'. J. R. Seeley, 'The British race', [1872] *Education I*, 4, (1881), quoted in Deborah Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the uses of history* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 163.

[104] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, p. 51.

[105] Ibid., pp. 50, 40, 43, 46.

[106] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, p. 293, and also pp. 42–3, 75, 169, 301.

[107] See for example, the comments in Seeley, *The expansion of England*, p. 193; there is, he proclaimed, 'no analogy in history' for the Indian empire. This unqualified claim does not sit easily with his latter comments about the relationship between the Roman and Indian Empires (p. 239).

[108] Ibid., pp. 304, 239, 261, 244.

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by Seeley. History taught, he argued, that empire and liberty could not be reconciled,

> Every historical student knows that it was the incubus of the Empire which destroyed liberty at Rome. Those old civic institutions, which had nursed Roman greatness and to which Rome owed all the civilisation which she had to transmit to the countries of the West, had to be given up as a condition of transmitting it. She had to adopt an organisation of, comparatively, a low type. Her civilisation, when she transmitted it, was already in decay.[109]

Greater Britain, a 'state' rather than an empire, was not subject to such a predicament. William Greswell, formerly Professor of Classics at Cape University, likewise accentuated the fundamental differences between the ancient empires and the modern British and he emphasized, echoing an argument made famous by Constant, the superiority of modern freedom.[110] 'The Britannica *civitas* is a far wider, and we may be allowed to believe a far more honoured, privilege. It is a *civitas* built upon freedom not despotism, upon tolerance rather than upon force, upon voluntary effort and individual enterprise rather than upon bureaucratic orders and state diplomacy.' Greswell demanded a 'confederacy of the British race', but added the qualifier that it was foolhardy to 'refer for guidance to ancient or modern confederacies'. It was instructive instead to look to the inspiring example set by the United States.[111] 'The British Empire of to-day, it cannot be too often repeated', intoned Egerton, 'is without precedent in the past. Even this, indeed, hardly expresses the truth.' The reason for this novelty, he maintained, lay in the fact that the colonies had been granted 'responsible government'.[112] Its uniqueness resided therefore in the degree of political freedom accorded to its inhabitants.

The concern with the nature of freedom, however vaguely articulated, was one of the reasons why America figured so prominently in imperial debate. To many Victorian observers of America, and to virtually all the imperialists who looked across the Atlantic for inspiration, the Americans had succeeded in creating an expansive republic in which liberty could flourish. In so doing they offered a serious practical challenge to a long-standing argument, exemplified perhaps most powerfully by Montesquieu, that stressed the impossibility of establishing a non-despotic polity on such a scale. It is 'evident', argued Seeley, 'that the United States has found the solution of that great problem of expansion on a vast scale, which we have seen all the five Western nations of Europe in succession failing to

[109] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, p. 246.

[110] William Greswell, 'Imperial federation: prize essay', London Chamber of Commerce, *England and her colonies: the five best essays on imperial federation submitted to the London Chamber of Commerce for their prize competition* (London, 1887), p. 7. See also Benjamin Constant, 'The liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns' [1819], in Constant, *Political writings*, pp. 307–28. Constant was, however, a vehement critic of empires, as they challenged liberty both at home and abroad.

[111] Greswell, 'Imperial federation', p. 7.

[112] Egerton, *A short history of British colonial policy*, p. 455.

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solve'.[113] It offered the best example of 'confident and successful expansion', combining dynamic growth with constitutional government and civil liberties.[114] George Parkin, an enthusiastic imperial federalist, observed that, 'the growth of the United States had widened political horizons'.[115] It had 'proved', he wrote in a revealing passage, 'that immense territorial extent is not incompatible, under modern conditions, with that representative system of government which had its birth and development in England, and its most notable adaptation in America'.[116] From the apparent triumph of America, the ideologues of Greater Britain divined the possibility of success for their global schemes. No longer did federation connote weakness, nor size despotism. 'Libertas et Imperium' – Disraeli's artful misquotation of Tacitus[117] – could be reconciled after all. Whereas previous incarnations had demonstrated the incompatibility of empire and liberty, and the inevitable transience of imperial rule, the United States proved to them that it was possible to be both great and free. Greater Britain had a successful precedent to draw upon after all.

IV

During the late nineteenth century, when the British empire straddled the globe, many of the defenders and critics of this massive but fragmented political system drew frequently on the past in order to construct their clashing visions of the present and future. The pasts to which they looked were different, however, and so were the lessons they drew from them. As I have argued in this article, a prominent group of imperial thinkers deliberately eschewed mining the richest seam of historical precedent, thus defying centuries of imperial political thought and the historicizing trends of the time. Rather than simply ignoring the ancient empires, they actively dismissed them. Imaginatively leaping across both time and space, over 2,000 years and the vast breadth of the Atlantic Ocean, many of the advocates of Greater Britain instead sought authority in the image of America. This move was the result of the perceived consequences of understanding empires as transient, temporary, and, above all, self-dissolving. In order to defend a permanent global Anglo-Saxon polity, they tried to escape this trajectory, to anchor their vision in secure temporal foundations. Greater Britain was to be located in a progressive narrative, open to the future not condemned by the past.

The magnetic pull exerted by the ancient world was, however, hard to resist. During the following generation some prominent advocates of imperial unity returned to the Greeks as an inspiration for the idea of a global British

[113] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, p. 158. See also J. R. Seeley, 'The united states of Europe', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 23 (1871), p. 443. [114] Seeley, *The expansion of England*, pp. 298 and 300.
[115] George Parkin, *Imperial federation* (London, 1892), p. 33. [116] Ibid., p. 33.
[117] Disraeli coined the phrase in 1851; see here Jenkyns, *The Victorians and ancient Greece*, p. 333. Freeman also employed the phraseology, though in a critical manner: '"Imperium" and "libertas" after all do not get on well as yoke-fellows' ('Imperial federation', p. 444).

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commonwealth. In particular Lionel Curtis, drawing on the work of the classicist Alfred Zimmern, sought to model a future imperial polity on a highly modernist interpretation of Athens.[118] And the Victorians were ultimately no more successful in escaping the orbit of the ancients: by focusing on the United States, itself so much the product, at least in the heated moment of founding, of the ancient writers, the proponents of a Greater British polity ended up taking an indirect route back to Greece and Rome, to the very point of their departure. Forged in the ideological cauldron of the late eighteenth century, the intellectual roots of the independent United States were to be found in the works of the pagan ancients, the 'resolve' of the founders 'fortified by the sturdy civic virtue of Cato and Brutus, their idea of republican self-government indebted to Greco-Roman models'.[119] America was rooted in the ancient soil that the advocates of Greater Britain so desperately sought to evade.

[118] Lionel Curtis, *The commonwealth of nations* (London, 1916), p. 26. See here Jeanne Morefield, 'The glissade of commonwealth: Alfred Zimmern's recasting of empire', paper presented at the International Studies Association annual convention, Honolulu, March 2005.

[119] Colin Kidd, 'Damnable deficient', *London Review of Books*, 27 (2005), p. 30. See Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment*; Carl J. Richard, *The founders and the classics* (Cambridge, MA, 1994); and M. N. S. Sellers, *American republicanism* (Basingstoke, 1994).

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