

Britishness as an imperial and diasporic identity: Irish elite perspectives, c.1820–70s

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In so far as the term 'Britishness' was used in Victorian Ireland, it had strong imperial connotations, especially among Protestants. The importance of empire in the construction of Irish Protestant identity, particularly among evangelical Protestants, has long been recognised. Some Irish historians, such as Donal Lowry, have gone so far as to conclude that 'Ulster's Britishness was and remains primarily an imperial, not a metropolitan variety of Britishness'.¹ However, in general historians have been slow to recognise that many Irish Catholic people saw the empire in positive terms too. Perhaps even more important, historians have been slow to recognise that Irish support for the empire reflected perspectives that were varied, and that were often quite different from English perspectives. Irish perspectives (both Protestant and Catholic) were shaped by various political ideologies and attitudes, by Irish pragmatic goals, and by various non-English senses of identity. Furthermore, Irish colonisers, both Catholic and Protestant, played important roles in shaping British identity in the colonies. The varied forms of Irish participation in the imperial project allow us to assess how ideas about empire affected the construction of British identity both in Ireland and among Irish members of colonial societies.

Irish emigration to America vastly outweighed Irish emigration to the settlement colonies throughout the nineteenth century, and this has encouraged us to forget that between 1815 and 1910 about one-third of the population of white settlers in the British empire were Irish, and that this figure does not include those Irish people who were active in the empire as missionaries, soldiers, or who were in temporary colonial postings.² The Irish were undeniably significant and active participants in the 'British' empire, whether this participation was as 'internal others', as junior partners in empire, or as 'enthusiastic imperialists'. To varying degrees they became conscious of their role in the imperial project and they took part in the construction of the identities involved, which ranged from senses of diasporic Irish identity, emerging colonial national identities, and a sense of British imperial identity. Because this empire was not in general controlled from the metropolitan centre by the

¹ Donal Lowry, 'Ulster resistance and loyalist rebellion in the empire', in Keith Jeffery (ed.), *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 208–9. ² D.H. Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: a Primer* (Belfast, 1996), p. 56.

British state, but was instead driven by the efforts of individuals and diverse groups on the spot (although often calling upon the British state for assistance and protection), the perceptions and experiences of Irish colonists played an important role in the development of a British imperial identity, and a role that was quite different from that played by English colonists.

This essay focuses in particular on the roles played by liberal members of the Irish elite in the development of a liberal model of empire, which had quite different implications from those of conservative Protestant approaches to empire. This liberal view of empire made it possible for Irish (and other non-English) people, whether Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or nationalist, to find a place as colonisers within the empire and at the same time retain a sense of their Irishness. Whether the Irish subscribed to Britishness in the colonies as a national identity or as a form of imperial patriotism varied, just as it varied among Scottish, Welsh, and English colonists. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century it became possible and even advantageous for many Irish people to subscribe to a broad and flexible notion of imperial Britishness, and a notion of the empire as a loose British framework characterised by local variation and the rule of law, within which might fit their colonial aspirations. Furthermore, the network of connections and movements of Irish people throughout a 'British world' in this period (not only between Ireland and the colonies, but also between different colonies, America, and back to Ireland) meant that Irish people at home also became increasingly aware of the ways in which the language of imperial Britishness could be turned to their advantage, and in particular could be used to frame aspirations toward self-government in Ireland. Debates about identity were concerned with pragmatic benefits and power relations, as well as with issues of emotional and cultural attachment.

Ireland provides an interesting case for consideration within both British and imperial discussions of 'centre' and 'periphery', because the Irish seem to shift places from 'periphery' to 'centre' and back again, depending on the context. Irish historians have consistently resisted the notion that Irish history should always be seen in relation to British history, and have preferred to study Irish history in its own right. But they are now beginning to consider the implications of this 'centre' and 'periphery' debate in British history, and in particular for the reassessment of Irish emigration to England.³ This work connects with the vision of Irish history developed by postcolonial scholars and literary critics in particular, and it links Ireland with other postcolonial societies, whose experiences and approaches to Britain were similar because of their shared experience of being colonised. In this reading, nineteenth-century British or English identity was framed against an Irish 'other'.⁴ Catherine Hall uses this

³ See, for example, Mary Hickman's chapter in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (eds), *The Irish in Victorian Britain: The Local Dimension* (Dublin, 1999), and Graham Davis, *The Irish in Britain, 1815–1914* (Dublin, 1991). ⁴ For example, see David Cairns and Shaun Richards,

work to develop a wider assessment of the cultural impacts empire had upon metropolitan Britain. She argues that the way the Irish were perceived within Britain was shaped by the emergence of a racial conception of British identity from the 1830s, which developed in response to British experiences of race in the empire. As a result, the Irish were an 'internal other' in the British metropolitan centre, and were only one step above the black African 'external' other which were so prominent in mid-Victorian discussions of parliamentary reform and of the Morant Bay rebellion.⁵

Some Irish historians have noted difficulties with this interpretation, especially with its tendency to focus on the working-class Catholic Irish rather than on the whole range of Irish emigrants.⁶ This forms part of a long-running debate in Irish historiography, but there is also growing awareness that Ireland's involvement in the United Kingdom ran parallel with her involvement in the empire, and that these focuses of Irish involvement in the United Kingdom and in the empire were inter-related.⁷ One of the main positive aspects of the Union between Britain and Ireland was that it widened Irish access to imperial opportunities in the nineteenth century, for the Protestant elite and also for Irish Catholics. This awareness of the benefits that flowed from Irish activities in the empire, pursued as colonisers and not simply as a colonised people, created the possibility of a much more favourable view of empire. As a result, Tom Bartlett argues, there was much more widespread and conscious identification with the empire, among both nationalists and Unionists in Ireland, and among both Catholics and Protestants, than identification with the Union.⁸ Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh has also recently argued that Irish identity in the nineteenth century was not only constructed within the framework of the Union in the nineteenth century, but also that both British and Irish identity were closely connected with a favourable view of the British empire, as an arena within which the Irish could prosper.⁹

Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture (Manchester, 1988); Seamus Deane, 'Imperialism/Nationalism', in E. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin (eds), *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (2nd edn, Chicago, 1995), pp. 354–68; David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-colonial Moment* (Dublin, 1993); Luke Gibbons, 'Race against time: racial discourse and Irish history', in his *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996), pp. 149–63. See also exchanges between Steven Ellis, Nicholas Canny, and Brendan Bradshaw in Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994).
 5 Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000). For another interpretation of 'peripheral' impacts upon the metropolis, see Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester, 2001).
 6 See G. Walker, 'The Protestant Irish in Scotland', in T. Devine (ed.), *Irish Immigrants and Scottish Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1991).
 7 Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000).
 8 Thomas Bartlett, 'This famous island set in a Virginian sea: Ireland and the British Empire', in P.J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire. III: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 256–7.
 9 Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'Ireland under the

As a group, the elite and gentry were particularly significant in empire, not just as settlers, but also as colonial administrators, policemen, members of the armed forces, professionals, and clerics and missionaries. They developed extended networks throughout the empire which provided further opportunities for them, and also provided a conduit through which attitudes and experiences of empire flowed back to Ireland. Because they were frequently in colonial postings or in the army, they were more likely to return to Ireland than were settlers or poorer Irish people. This essay considers a particular group of intermarried liberal Protestant families that emerged in counties Limerick and Clare (including an inner circle of Spring Rices, Bourkes, de Veres, and O'Briens, and a second tier of connected families including the Quaker Harvey and Fisher families). All were involved in a network that spanned the imperial world, and many spent time in one or more of the colonies, or were deeply involved in colonial and emigration policy. This group was Whig-Liberal and Unionist in political terms, they were liberal in religion, and they emerged as prominent opponents of the evangelical crusade in the 1820s and as supporters of Catholic emancipation. They were reformers who saw British and Irish identities as nested and compatible within the framework of the Union. This was possible because they saw Britishness as broadly Christian rather than specifically Protestant, and as an inclusive or umbrella identity. Because members of this group were prominent in debates in Ireland, at Westminster, and in the colonies, it is possible to see how their understandings of Britishness in each of the three contexts interacted.

This essay considers two members of this group of intermarried families – Sir Richard Bourke and William Smith O'Brien. They emerged from a shared cultural and political milieu, and both spent time in the Australian colonies before returning to Ireland, but their political ideas and perspectives on Ireland came to diverge quite dramatically by the 1850s. Sir Richard Bourke was an officer in the British army during the Napoleonic Wars and took part in the Peninsula War, and then retired to County Limerick where he became a landlord and a well-known liberal Protestant reformer in Limerick politics. Between 1818 and 1820 he was election manager for Thomas Spring Rice (MP for Limerick 1820–31, then MP for Cambridge and Whig-Liberal chancellor of the exchequer in the late 1830s). Bourke went to the Cape Colony as lieutenant governor between 1823 and 1826, and then to New South Wales as a reforming governor between 1831 and 1837, before returning to Ireland in retirement. In contrast, though William Smith O'Brien emerged into adulthood in the 1820s and 1830s as a religious liberal and a liberal Tory in political terms; in 1843 he joined the National Repeal Association which sought to repeal the Act of Union; and then he became one of the founding leaders of the Young Ireland movement and was transported to

Van Diemen's Land for his role in leading the Young Ireland Rising in 1848. While a gentleman convict, he wrote anonymous articles on colonial politics in the local newspaper. He also wrote a two-volume treatise entitled *Principles of Government*,¹⁰ which outlined his thoughts on legitimate government in general, and on legitimate government in Ireland and the Australian colonies in particular. He was eventually pardoned and returned to Ireland, and then undertook speaking tours in America and Canada, travelled in Europe, and continued a low-key participation in Irish political debate. While there has been much research on O'Brien's ideas in the 1840s and in particular on his role in Young Ireland, the periods beforehand and especially afterward, are not so well known. As a result, the consistency of his support of British imperialism before and after his emergence as a revolutionary nationalist has been poorly understood.¹¹

In the 1820s and 30s moderate reformers such as those in this Limerick group usually used the term 'empire' in a number of different but related ways. First, they used it to indicate Ireland's membership of the British core, and to argue that Ireland could use the Union for its own gain. According to Thomas Spring Rice in his 1834 speech in support of the Union, Ireland was as much an equal partner in this 'United Empire' as was Scotland, Wales, and England. The 'Imperial Parliament' provided 'easier redress for many local evils, than [either Scotland or Ireland] could have found in separate Legislatures of their own, swayed as those Legislatures would have been by conflicting interests'.¹² As a result, Spring Rice repudiated O'Connell's assertion that the Union represented the attempted imperial annexation and domination by a foreign English state, and that the Irish were a subjugated people akin to slaves in colonies such as Jamaica.¹³ On the contrary, it was the 'Parliament of the United Kingdom; not the Parliament of England' that legislated for Ireland, and Irish MPs were well represented in that Parliament.¹⁴ As a result, Spring Rice and other Irish liberal Protestants argued that the Irish lost none of their identity as a 'separate people' by becoming British, but they gained the opportunity of participating in a powerful British state which gave them the capacity to affect

¹⁰ William Smith O'Brien, *Principles of Government; or Meditations in Exile ... in 2 Volumes* (Dublin, 1856). ¹¹ A recent exception is Richard Davis, whose *Revolutionary Imperialist: William Smith O'Brien, 1803–1864* (Dublin, 1998) also deals with some of the issues raised in this essay.

¹² Spring Rice's Speech in the House of Commons debate on the Repeal of the Union, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, vol. 22, col. 1194 (24 April 1834). ¹³ There is not sufficient space to consider the question of race directly, but the historical debate about this is far from settled. See discussion in Jennifer Ridden, "'Making Good Citizens": National Identity, Religion, and Liberalism among the Irish Elite, c. 1800–1850' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Kings College, London, 1998), chapter 6; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York and London, 1995); Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire*, chapter 4; Graham Walker, 'Old History: Protestant Ulster in Lee's Ireland', *Irish Review*, 12 (1992), 66; and D.H. Akenson, *If the Irish Ran the World: Montserrat, 1630–1730* (Liverpool, 1997), pp. 174–5. ¹⁴ Spring Rice's speech in the debate on the Repeal of the Union, *Hansard*, 3rd ser., vol. 22, col. 1179 (24 April 1834).

both domestic English affairs and in the colonies overseas. And so, Spring Rice warmly congratulated Emerson Tennent on his 1834 speech in support of the Union, when he said that,

[the Irish MP] sits [in Parliament] to legislate ... for the interests of the most opulent and powerful empire in the universe ... [he helps to extend] the blessings of freedom from the confines of India to the remotest shores of the Atlantic; to liberate the Hindoo, and to strike off the fetters of the African ... these are honours which enable us, whilst we pride ourselves upon our birth-place, as Irishmen, to add to our distinctions the glory of being Britons.¹⁵

One example of the way Limerick liberal Protestants participated in legislating for the empire was the key role they played in shaping the schemes for assisted emigration. Thomas Spring Rice was colonial under-secretary for a short time and was instrumental in the development of the assisted emigration schemes along with his son Stephen, William Smith O'Brien, and Stephen de Vere. In New South Wales, Richard Bourke organised the colonial lobbying for Irish assisted emigrants, and made preparations for their reception. Thomas Spring Rice took personal advantage of these schemes, which provided new opportunities for his tenants as colonial settlers in Canada and Australia, and at the same time he used the schemes to clear his estates.¹⁶ A common Irish liberal justification for this activity was used by Aubrey de Vere, when he argued that Ireland was owed these imperial opportunities as recompense for centuries of mistreatment by the British State. As he wrote in 1850, colonisation

supplies at critical periods ... the "means of amendment" – that is, a blank slate to remould an individual or national "estate" burdened by the original sin of accumulated pauperism.¹⁷

¹⁵ Sir James Emerson Tennent's speech in the debate on the Repeal of the Union, *ibid.*, cols 1297, 1313, 1314 (24 April 1834). As the Liberal member for Belfast from 1832, Tennent was an enthusiastic supporter of moderate reform and of Spring Rice; however, in 1834 he was one of the few Irish Liberals to join Lord Stanley's defection on the appropriation of Church revenues question. ¹⁶ Christopher O'Mahony and Valerie Thompson, *Poverty to Promise: The Monteagle Emigrants, 1838–58* (Darlinghurst, 1994). Spring Rice's and de Vere's sons played an important role in collecting information for parliamentary inquiries into Irish emigration, and Stephen de Vere's evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Colonisation from Ireland in 1847 (which was chaired by his uncle Thomas Spring Rice, now Lord Monteagle) was crucial in reforming the Passenger Act. See also Stephen De Vere's diary of his voyage to Quebec, 1847–1848 *America Journals*, Trinity College Library, Dublin, Manuscripts Department, MSS 5061–5062; Ruth-Ann M. Harris, "Where the poor man is not crushed to exalt the aristocrat": Vere Foster's programmes of assisted emigration in the aftermath of the Irish Famine', in Patrick O'Sullivan (ed.), *The Meaning of the Famine* (London, 1997), pp. 172–93; and Ridden, "Making Good Citizens", chapter 7. ¹⁷ Aubrey de Vere, *Colonisation*

Irish Liberals like Sir Richard Bourke were also active in colonial administration. When Bourke went to New South Wales as a Whig-Liberal governor in 1831, he took with him a well-developed notion of the empire as a framework which provided opportunities for the Irish as well as the English and Scots, and a notion of Britishness that was non-denominational and could encompass diverse groups of people, and was therefore transportable around the empire. He saw his role as one of overseeing the transformation of New South Wales from a penal colony to a colony of free settlement, where the inhabitants would be morally improved to the extent that they could participate in free political institutions. He aimed to make sure that Australia's emerging political and social institutions were constructed within a non-denominational British model, rather than a narrowly English Protestant one, because he thought this would ensure that a corrupt and illegitimate Protestant ascendancy like Ireland's would not develop in the Australian colonies. Consequently, he prevented the Church of England from becoming the state church in Australia, and forced a measure through the legislative council in 1833 which guaranteed funding for all the major churches.¹⁸ He also tried to create a non-denominational education system in New South Wales based on the model of the Irish National Schools system (which he had helped to design), arguing that it would 'alleviate religious and national conflicts ... soften social discontents ... and eradicate moral vices.'¹⁹ His efforts to allow ex-convicts to sit on juries gained him the support of the Emancipist Party, which was campaigning for political rights for convicts whose terms had expired, but who had previously found it difficult to answer the charge that they had foregone their rights as freeborn Englishmen when they were convicted of crimes. Bourke's view of British civilisation, which involved the belief that convicts could be reformed and morally improved, gave ex-convicts a basis for negotiation with the British state by allowing them to claim Britishness without having to conform to stringent English social norms and models.

However, Governor Bourke's vision of colonial Britishness was contested by other British groups within the colony. Despite his status as the colony's most senior representative of the British state, his activities attracted virulent opposition from the Anglican church in Australia, from colonial dissenters from Ireland, Scotland and England, and from colonial conservatives.²⁰ These varied critics found they had a shared weapon, namely, the accusation that Bourke was un-British because he undermined the colony's Protestantism and because he

(London, 1850), pp. 54–5. ¹⁸ Bourke to Lord Stanley, 30 September 1833, *Historical Records of Australia*, Series 1, vol. 17, p. 227. ¹⁹ Bourke to Dick Bourke jnr, 28 July 1836, Bourke family papers, State Library of New South Wales, Mitchell Library, ms 403/9. See also Roger Therry, *An Explanation of the Plan of the Irish National Schools* (Sydney, 1836). ²⁰ For example, Henry Cavendish Butler (St Helliens, Hunter River) to John Butler Danvers of Swithland Hall, Leicestershire, 20 August 1838, quoted in Patrick O'Farrell (ed.), *Letters From Irish-Australia, 1825–1929* (Sydney, 1984), pp. 33–4. Butler was a Presbyterian from County Cavan, where he later returned to the life of a substantial landlord.

favoured Irish radicalism in New South Wales. Thus, the conservative *Sydney Herald* warned that Bourke's education schemes fostered an 'O'Connellite Tail faction' in New South Wales, and that he favoured his Irish 'com-Pat-riots'. His education proposal would give ascendancy in the colony to 'the children of the present race of transported Irish papists, at the expense of the Protestant land-holders of this country'.²¹ This is ironic, considering Irish liberal Protestants like Bourke were involved in a bitter competition with the O'Connellites for status as the legitimate elite in Ireland during the 1820s and 1830s. But these subtleties were lost on the *Sydney Herald* which argued merely that Bourke was trying to turn New South Wales into an Irish rather than a British colony. Bourke's answer to these kinds of charges was that New South Wales should develop toward a non-denominational form of self-government in order to guarantee that it could develop institutions that reflected its particular character, which was neither wholly English nor wholly Protestant. The Church of England in Australia should not be responsible for education because it was not the established church in the colony. Bourke argued that 'the interests of Religion would be prejudiced by [the Church of England's] Establishment' in the Australian colonies, and by allowing the Church to control education, because 'the inclination of the colonists, which keeps pace with the Spirit of the Age, is decidedly averse to such an Institution'.²² In his view, British colonies should not be confined to narrow English and Protestant conventions, unless this reflected both the demographic make-up of their inhabitants and the practical conditions in which they operated. This was certainly not the case in New South Wales, where Catholics formed between one-quarter and one-third of the population during the whole of the nineteenth century.

Even among the Irish in New South Wales, perspectives on Britishness as an imperial identity were varied, but they varied in ways that did not map precisely to perspectives within Ireland. Many Protestants felt an affinity with the British empire as an extension of their Unionism, and empire was also seen as a wider mission of civilisation and Protestant evangelism. Thus in the settlement colonies (especially Canada and Australia), the Twelfth of July was transformed into Empire Day, which drew in a broad coalition of British Protestants across the whole empire in celebration of the spread of Protestantism, and loyalty to the Protestant constitution and to the Protestant monarchy, which surmounted the differences between colonies.²³ Yet, despite the widespread assumption that

²¹ *Sydney Herald*, 21 January 1836. This disparaging recognition of the Bourke family's Irishness was important in female 'society' as well; Fanny Macleay somewhat cattily commented that Anne (Bourke's daughter) was 'a stout plain, common looking person quite *Irish* but a most admirable songster', Fanny Macleay to W.S. Macleay, 8 January 1832, Fanny Macleay letters, cited in Steven G. Foster, 'Edward Deas Thomson and New South Wales' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of New England, 1975), p. 99. See also *Sydney Herald*, 4 July, 1 August, 13 October 1836. ²² Bourke to Lord Stanley, 30 September 1833, *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I, Vol. 17, pp. 224–33, especially p. 227. ²³ For example, see Lowry,

empire, monarchy and Protestantism were an indissoluble triplet that formed the basis of British identity, many Irish Catholics in the settlement colonies displayed a sense of connection to an imperial form of identity, which was linked with the monarchy and the rule of law, but which was distanced from Protestantism, from a sense of domination by a foreign imperial state, and in particular from direct rule by the British state. This was especially prevalent among middle-class Irish Catholics who sought respectability and power within the colony. Thus, at the 1881 St Patrick's Day banquet in Sydney the toasts offered were (in order of priority):

The Queen;

The Prince of Wales and the rest of the Royal family;

The Governor;

The Day we celebrate [i.e. St Patrick's Day];

The Land we live in;

The Parliament of NSW; and finally,

Ladies, Press and Chairman.²⁴

Similarly, the paraphernalia of St Patrick's Day processions in the Australian colonies expressed the desire to avoid contentious and divisive contemporary politics in Ireland, to reaffirm Irish-Australian loyalty to the crown, and to assert Irish claims to civilisation that paralleled English civilisation, and could therefore claim equal standing with it. Middle-class Catholics were particularly vociferous in combining their claim to a sense of separate Irish-Catholic cultural identity with their claim to full membership and citizenship within this British colony. As a result, Catholics in Australia were hostile to attempts to set up Land League branches in Australia, but they were much more supportive of Redmond when he toured New South Wales. His perspective on Home Rule fitted more easily with their own hopes that, like the Australian colonies, Ireland could be self-governing within a loyal and loosely British imperial framework.²⁵

Bourke's views on the development of a loose British model of empire in the 1830s meshed with a more generalised liberal notion of empire after the loss of the American colonies. Victorian Liberals promoted a notion of Britishness in the United Kingdom and in the empire which can be best conceived as a framework within which relationships between groups and between localities could be negotiated, and within which various contending identity claims were made. This framework was defined by a few key elements including the rule of law, mixed government, the sense that inclusion in a community was neither geographically nor ethnically defined, and a notion of civilisation that was Christian rather than specifically Protestant. However, beyond the basic criteria

'Ulster resistance and loyalist rebellion in the empire'. ²⁴ Quoted in P.J. O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (2nd edn, Sydney, 1992), p. 225. See also James H. Murphy, *Abject Loyalty: Nationalism and Monarchy in Ireland During the Reign of Queen Victoria* (Washington, DC, 2001).

²⁵ O'Farrell, *Irish in Australia*, pp. 219–23.

for belonging, there was very little sameness throughout the 'British' community worldwide, because the nineteenth-century United Kingdom and the British empire were nothing if not pluralistic. Britishness remained a significant tool in contests between colonial interest groups, because it allowed them to make legitimacy claims, and thus could be used to justify various schemes for restructuring relations between interest groups within colonies, and between the colonies and the British state. Colonial political power relations were structured in very different ways from those in the United Kingdom, and involved clientage relations with the governor, lobbying of Westminster and the Colonial Office, parliamentary inquiries, and so on, and this affected the kinds of arguments used.²⁶ This meant that debates about identity in the colonies did not simply replicate or even necessarily derive directly from those in the United Kingdom, even though colonial groups that claimed Britishness frequently used their connectedness to Britain to claim legitimacy for their demands.

By the 1830s and 1840s the liberal conception of Britishness was considered particularly relevant to the demands for 'Responsible Government' or devolution in political institutions from the British state to the settlement colonies, as well as to Ireland and Scotland, because it allowed a degree of variation between regions whose populations could be considered broadly 'British' but which had different requirements and senses of identity. Colonies of settlement such as Canada and Australia were considered improvable despite large Catholic or convict populations, because their populations were largely European and could therefore not be reasonably denied British liberties. Yet, according to Liberals, the attempted incorporation of French Catholics into a British colony in Canada, and Irish Catholics into the British colonies in Australia, required a degree of relaxation in the three usual criteria for full Britishness, namely that colonies must conform to British norms, that they must accept the direct authority of the British state, and that they must be Protestant.²⁷ As James Stephen put it in the 1860s, the right course of action for settlement colonies had been that of

cheerfully relaxing, one after another, the bonds of authority, as soon as the colony itself clearly desired that relaxation ... no national pride wounded, or national greatness diminished, or national duty abandoned.²⁸

On the other hand, those colonies with large native populations or slaves were deemed unimprovable and could therefore be ruled directly and with force. Thus, in Stephen's view, 'The rest are unfit for it – detached islands with het-

²⁶ J.B. Hirst, *Convict Society and its Enemies* (Sydney, 1983), pp. 169–72. ²⁷ For example, Lord Durham, 'Report on the Affairs of British North America' (1839), in Arthur Berridale Keith (ed.), *Selected Speeches and Documents in British Colonial Policy, 1763–1917* (Oxford, 1929). ²⁸ Quoted in Kenneth N. Bell and W.P. Morrell (eds), *Select Documents on British Colonial Policy, 1830–1860* (Oxford, 1928), p. xxiv.

erogeneous populations – wretched burdens which in an evil hour we assumed and have no right to lay down again.²⁹ This liberal model of empire was further developed by John Stuart Mill in the 1840s and 1850s, and an increasingly hard line was drawn between those colonies and native peoples that were capable of improvement, and those that were not.³⁰ The liberal conception of empire required an acceptance of regional variation, and it was allied with the development of an emphasis on self-government within a loose British framework.

Ireland occupied an ambiguous position in this liberal model of empire. It was ruled by force for much of the nineteenth century and many Irish nationalists, including Daniel O'Connell and John Mitchel, argued that Ireland had been annexed by a foreign English state. The escalation of racialised attitudes toward the Irish from the 1840s onward, also suggests that Ireland fitted on the 'imperial domination' side of the equation and, in the minds of many English observers, the Irish were uncivilised, un-Saxon, and were therefore unfit for self-government. According to Thomas Carlyle, for example, the Irish shared their savagery with black people, but 'having a white skin and European features, [they] cannot be prevented from circulating among us at discretion, and to all manner of lengths and breadths'.³¹ Even English Liberals like John Stuart Mill felt they could not take for granted which side of the liberal divide the Irish fell. He argued that India and Jamaica were clearly not ready for self-government because their peoples were not sufficiently civilised to make them fit for liberty, and thus their government was necessarily and to 'a considerable degree despotic'. Similarly, the Irish had not yet demonstrated 'a measure of the qualities which fit a people for self-government', but he argued that they must be incorporated into the Union despite their backwardness, because they were white, because many of them now lived in England and Scotland, and because many could vote.³² In general, Irish Liberals did not challenge the liberal model of empire, but they focused instead on contesting Ireland's place within that model. Furthermore, once the Irish became directly involved in imperial expansion, the need to defend their place on the white 'civilised' side of the imperial and racial divide, and to defend themselves against accusations of disloyalty and religious inferiority, became even more acute.

The Irish were part of the United Kingdom by virtue of the Union, and after Catholic emancipation in 1829 removed political disabilities from Catholics, it was easier to argue that the Irish were British citizens with a legitimate claim to British liberty. The experiences and roles of Irish colonisers, administrators and professionals in the empire added further weight to this case.

²⁹ Ibid. ³⁰ Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: a Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999). ³¹ Quoted in Hall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, p. 213. ³² John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), reprinted in J.M. Robson (ed.) *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, vol. 19: Essays on Politics and Society* (Toronto, 1977), p. 377, and Mill, *England and Ireland* (1868), in *ibid.*, vol. 6: *Essays on England, Ireland and the Empire* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 524–6. See also Hall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, pp. 188–91.

As a result, it became more viable for Irish nationalists to argue that Ireland was a civilised and improvable society which could legitimately demand British liberty and self-government within a broad British imperial framework. By the 1880s this argument was being made by many constitutional nationalists in the Irish Home Rule movement, including John Redmond and Charles Stewart Parnell.³³ For example, Parnell told his audience in 1885 that

We can show the powers that have been freely conceded to the colonies – to the greater colonies [that is, the settlement colonies] – including this very power to protect their own industries against and at the expense of those of England. We can show that disaffection had disappeared in all the greater English colonies, that while the Irishman who goes to the United States of America carries with him a burning hatred of English rule, ... the Irishman coming from the same village, ... equally maltreated, ... who goes to one of the colonies of Canada or one of the colonies of Australia, and finds there another and a different system of English rule to that which he has been accustomed to at home, becomes to a great extent a loyal citizen and a strength and a prop to the community amongst whom his lot has been cast; ... He no longer continues to look upon the name of England as a symbol of oppression, and the badge of the misfortunes of his country (*cheers*) ... The English statesman who is great enough ... to give to Ireland full legislative liberty, full power to manage her own domestic concerns, will be regarded in the future by his countrymen as one who has removed the greatest peril to the English empire (*hear, hear*).³⁴

The ambiguity of Ireland's place in the United Kingdom and in the empire produced double standards among many English speakers, but it also produced opportunities for the Irish (both nationalists and Unionists). In the Victorian period it became possible for nationalists and Unionists to manipulate the liberal model of empire to suit their own purposes, and the Irish were not averse to turning the imperial language used by English Conservatives against them. Thus, Irish participation in empire multiplied the possibilities of using imperial language for Irish purposes, whether nationalist or Unionist, especially when this aim was combined with growing public awareness of colonial affairs within domestic Britain.

When Irish liberal Protestant reformers drew comparisons between Ireland and the overseas colonies in the late 1840s and 1850s, they were more likely to group Ireland with the colonies of settlement than with colonies like Jamaica

33 C.A. Bayly, 'Ireland, India and the empire: 1780–1914', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 10 (2000), 377–97; Ó Tuathaigh, 'Ireland under the Union: a critique'. 34 Charles Stewart Parnell, 'Speech at Wicklow', *Freeman's Journal*, 6 October 1885.

or India, on the grounds that Ireland was improvable and its people were legitimate claimants of British liberties. This did not stop them from using the language of empire when accusing the British state of misrule, but they used it for a different purpose from many Irish nationalists. For example, when Aubrey de Vere published his *English Misrule and Irish Misdeeds* during the Famine, he used the language of empire which was being popularised in the *Nation*, but he deliberately used it to argue an opposite case. He concluded that if Britain abandoned illegitimate 'empirical [i.e. empire-ical] legislation, ... prejudiced discussion, and ... contemptuous and capricious benevolence', then England and Ireland could 'bury past animosities' and have a

union of mutual respect, good-will, and good deeds ... May the imperial nation thus built up be worthy of its destinies, and show to the inferior nations of the earth for what cause nationalities exist.³⁵

Irish Liberals such as de Vere, Bourke, and Spring Rice, used imperial language to help them define that Union in ways that were advantageous to Ireland, or to argue for a change the terms of that relationship within the existing constitutional framework. But they were not willing to forego Ireland's place in the United Kingdom under the Union for two main reasons. This constitutional relationship could be used to protect their own leadership within Ireland against challenge from below, and they believed that the Union provided them with greater opportunities both within the United Kingdom and in the empire.

William Smith O'Brien provides an interesting contrast to Richard Bourke and other Irish liberal reformers, despite the fact that they emerged from a shared Limerick liberal Protestant circle, and despite the fact that their approaches to empire and their political ideology during the late 1820s and 1830s were very similar. Like other Irish liberals, O'Brien was well aware of benefits of a British imperial identity which could encompass and serve the needs of Irish Catholics as well as Protestants, and which allowed Irish people unfettered access to imperial opportunities and spoils. When in 1840 he put forward a private member's bill proposing a state-funded scheme of assisted emigration to the settlement colonies, he argued that this would:

At once ... relieve the necessities of the population of the mother country [in which he included Ireland], and, at the same time, [would] ... extend the resources and promote aggrandisement of *our* colonial empire, ... thus converting the involuntary idler into an active and prosperous colonist.³⁶

³⁵ Aubrey de Vere, *English Misrule and Irish Misdeeds* (London, 1848), pp. 263–4. ³⁶ William Smith O'Brien, speech on emigration, *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 54, cols 832–3, 848 (2 June 1840) [italics mine].

In this speech he reminded the House of Commons that ‘almost all of the evils under which Ireland still suffers have been, either remotely or immediately, occasioned by English misgovernment’.³⁷ The clear implication was that he viewed the British state’s mishandling of famine relief as the most recent example of misgovernment, but Ireland’s membership of the United Kingdom now allowed her MPs to claim financial support that would redress these evils. Significantly, though, he went further and argued explicitly that helping the Irish poor to participate in the empire would teach them to identify with an imperial form of British identity. He explained,

There is no more legitimate kind of national pride than that which exults in viewing our country [the United Kingdom] as the parent of many nations, whose future greatness is destined to bear witness to the wisdom and the energy of the people who founded them ... No, Sir, instead of circumscribing [the Irish poor’s] patriotism within the limits of a parish or a province, we ought rather to teach them to indulge the more expansive nationality of regarding every portion of the British empire as the home of the enterprising and the free.³⁸

By early 1843 he had become so disillusioned with the Union that he called it a ‘system of misgovernment’, which was ‘unjust, exclusive, overbearing, and an anti-national system of domination by which Ireland has been oppressed for 600 years’, and which had resulted in the illegitimate use of force.³⁹ The Irish Liberals’ failure to persuade the British government to push Irish reforms through parliament prompted O’Brien to abandon the O’Connellite reform movement in favour of the Young Ireland and then the Irish Confederation movements.⁴⁰ Yet there is no indication in 1840 that O’Brien thought the British empire as a whole was illegitimate in principle. This comes as a surprise from someone who led a revolutionary nationalist rising eight years later, who wrote for the revolutionary nationalist newspaper the *Nation*, and who was connected with John Mitchel during the 1840s (although Mitchel was always more radical than O’Brien). It was O’Brien’s liberal ideology that provided a framework that allowed him to maintain consistent support for British imperial endeavours in the settlement colonies. Like other liberals, O’Brien differentiated between legitimate colonisation through settlement under the rule of law where ‘wealth was produced ... by the labour of [European] emigrants upon the virgin soil of a fruitful territory’, and the illegitimate imperial domination of civilised peoples by force.⁴¹ As he explain in the *Principles of Government*,

³⁷ Ibid., col. 837. ³⁸ Ibid., cols 833, 851. ³⁹ *Dublin Evening Mail*, 14 June 1843. ⁴⁰ Robert Sloan, ‘O’Connell’s liberal rivals in 1843’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 30:117 (1996), 47–65. ⁴¹ *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 54, col. 849 (2 June 1840).

A constitution which produces the happiest results amongst a community of Americans would lead to nothing but confusion if conferred upon an Asiatic population accustomed to despotic rule ... a paper constitution – however perfectly devised, never gave, nor ever can give, liberty to a people who are indisposed to exercise self-government ... Neither legislators nor writers on the theory of government can create public spirit in the minds of a people to whom this sentiment is unknown, [however,] they can effectively aid in developing it where it exists. [Thus,] Peculiarities of national character, traditional ideas, feelings, and habits, as well as local circumstances of various kinds, must be taken into account in moulding the political institutions of each country.⁴²

Consequently, he supported the notion of a generalised division between civilised societies that were capable the ‘public spirit’ upon which liberty and civility depended, and uncivilised societies that were incapable of liberty.

His support for ‘legitimate’ colonial expansion through Wakefieldian settlement remained consistent throughout his life, both before and after the Young Ireland rising in 1848; in fact, it actually intensified as a result of his observations in the Australian colonies. As he explained in 1858, ‘When I was in Australia I met many hundred Irishmen who had realised more than a competency – and in a few instances some who had acquired enormous wealth, though they had left Ireland unprovided with capital and impelled by a desire to escape indigence.’⁴³ Furthermore, while in Van Diemen’s Land, he wrote an anonymous article in the *Launceston Examiner* in support of ‘Responsible Government’, on the grounds that Van Diemen’s Land was improvable and that it required local political institutions in order to develop in ways that reflected its particular circumstances. His proposal of a ‘loose confederation’ of Australian colonies within a liberal imperial framework was workable because it allowed for local variation and self-government.⁴⁴

Although he consistently differentiated between ‘legitimate colonisation’ in the colonies of European settlement and imperial domination in non-white, uncivilised colonies, in fact his views on the latter underwent important shifts during his lifetime. In 1830 he was an active supporter of campaign to have the East India Company’s charter renewed, on the basis of Britain’s civilising mission. In his 1830 pamphlet on the subject, he wrote that, ‘In contemplating this vast [Indian] empire ... it is impossible not to glow with exultation at the glorious prospects which its acquisition has opened to Great Britain’. Imperial rule in India would achieve ‘the dethronement of a benighted religion’, education

⁴² *Principles of Government*, vol. 1, 1–3. ⁴³ *Nation*, 22 May 1858. ⁴⁴ His model constitution for Van Diemen’s Land, first published in the *Launceston Examiner*, 31 August 1853 (cited in Davis, *Revolutionary Imperialist*, p. 322), was later reproduced as an appendix in *Principles of Government*, vol. 2, 369–80.

would eliminate 'the impurer rites and extravagant doctrines of a debasing creed' and replace them with 'the pure morality and exalted spirit of Christianity ... In learning our language, and reading our books, the natives of India will imbibe their spirit, and exchange the feelings and ideas of Asia for the juster notions and more elevated principles of Europe.'⁴⁵

However, in later life he accused the British state of consistently mistreating civilised non-white people in the empire. For example, his 1858 response to the British invasion of Afghanistan and to the Indian Rebellion, he wrote in the *Nation* that, by supporting the East India Company in its intrigues and violence, the British state had pursued a policy of imperial annexation by force which had originated in Ireland, and that it was now applying the same illegitimate policy to the New Zealand Maoris.⁴⁶ It is notable that his two examples of illegitimate imperialism outside Ireland were both borderline examples in the liberal binary scheme and were societies which could lay some claim to being civilised and improvable and which did not fit neatly into the tropical 'unimprovable' category in the liberal model of empire. It is significant that he does not comment on British imperial rule in those colonies with large African populations, beyond the statement that the growing need for labour in British Guiana, Trinidad, Mauritius and Jamaica should be met by encouraging the immigration of free black labourers, rather than by Europeans.⁴⁷ That is, they were not seen as suitable destinations for civilised Irish settlers.

His conclusion that the Irish, Indians and New Zealand Maoris were all subjugated people who suffered under illegitimate British imperial rule was designed to make a political point which stemmed from Irish issues, namely, that Britain consistently undervalued the civilised qualities of the non-English people which it governed overseas and used this as an excuse for mistreatment. This fits neatly with his argument in the *Principles of Government*, that violence had been justified in Ireland because of its history of mistreatment by the British state. In the false belief that the Irish were uncivilised, the British state had illegitimately withheld liberty from the Irish, and had ruled Ireland against the interests of its inhabitants. O'Brien saw republican revolution as a legitimate response to this mistreatment, but it was a last resort. The demand for self-government and limited autonomy on a Canadian or Australian model within a liberal empire of settlement colonies was far preferable, and it would allow the Irish to 'enjoy, under an Irish Parliament and an Irish Ministry, the practical advantages of self-government'.⁴⁸ Furthermore, self-government within the

⁴⁵ William Smith O'Brien, *Considerations Relative to the Renewal of the East-India Company's Charter* (London, 1830), pp. 16–17, 29, 35, 55–7. ⁴⁶ *Nation*, 22 May 1858; *Principles of Government*, II, 224–7. ⁴⁷ William Smith O'Brien, speech on emigration, *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 54, col. 841 (2 June 1840). ⁴⁸ We cannot ignore the possibility that his writing after 1848 was tied up with his efforts to gain a pardon, and was thereafter motivated by a desire to rehabilitate his reputation in Britain and among the Irish elite. However, his *Principles of Government* is far too sophisticated an exploration of political philosophy, and his support for

imperial framework was likely to develop into an even better constitutional structure, namely, an 'international connection between Great Britain and Ireland' that was federal in style.⁴⁹ Thus, even though O'Brien participated in a revolutionary nationalist rising in 1848, within eight years he was proposing a form of Irish Home Rule that placed Ireland firmly within a British imperial framework, in ways that foreshadowed the arguments used by constitutional nationalists in the Irish Parliamentary Party thirty years later.

Although O'Brien shifted his political stance from what we might call liberal Unionism in the 1830s to liberal nationalism in the 1840s, both were conceived within a liberal British imperial framework which allowed scope for both Irish pragmatism and principled thinking. Thus, there was substantial common ground with other Irish Liberals like Bourke and Spring Rice in the 1830s and 40s, and nationalists such as Parnell and Redmond in the 1880s. These elite Unionists and nationalists all accepted the liberal division between civilised and non-civilised, or predominantly white and non-white colonies; but they objected to the assumption made by some English Liberals that the Irish should be classified with the uncivilised peoples, and they quite deliberately set about turning Ireland's ambiguous status and British imperial language to Irish advantage.

Queen Victoria's reign was an age of imperial expansion and the establishment of a new 'world order', and the Irish played some rather unexpected roles in that process which in turn played a part in re-shaping the way Irish issues were conceived at home. It is thought provoking that an Irish colonial governor and Irish gentleman convict transported for revolutionary activities could share very similar approaches to empire, and this highlights the complexity of identity formation in the 'British world'. British imperial identity within the empire was not fostered by a centralised state and unified elite in any straightforward manner, and then transmitted outwards into the empire and downwards to the popular level. Instead, it was contested, it was highly politicised, and it was adapted in response to changing circumstances and pragmatic political strategies. Consequently, imperial forms of Britishness can still be best understood as an overarching political and cultural framework within which identity claims were contested, and within which various cultural and interest groups negotiated both with each other and with the British state. This is compatible with Catherine Hall's conclusion, namely, that difference was mapped across nation and empire in many different ways, and subjects were constituted across multiple axes of power. However, it was this process of mapping that provided 'the basis for drawing lines as to who was inside and who was outside the nation or colony', and for what forms of cultural or political belonging were possible at any given time.⁵⁰ Where we perhaps differ is on the question of how this mapping related

colonisation far too consistent, to allow this explanation complete sway. ⁴⁹ *Nation*, 20 March 1858. ⁵⁰ Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 20.

to English or British identity. In the nineteenth century many elite interest groups, especially non-English elite interest groups, found that British identity could be used to achieve strategic advantage in political contests in their localities, and in the metropolitan centre as well, whereas Englishness was less amenable. This encouraged the development of various and competing forms of Britishness which were associated with debates about the relationship between different local communities within a 'British world', and about their relationships with the British state. Identity contests in the empire were not simply transplanted from England or Ireland. They varied because the interest groups, their relationships, the circumstances and the power structures within which they operated, were different. And these mapping episodes in various historical moments and places affected each other in complex ways, not least because the people involved moved from place to place around this 'British world'.

For many Irish nationalists the American model remained dominant. However, many other Irish people, whether Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or nationalist, saw the notion of a loose-fitting and liberal British imperial framework as an alternative to the American or earlier French models of republican nationalism. It was attractive because of its flexibility, which suited Irish colonisers who sought to defend their place as civilised white people, in an empire in which race was becoming increasingly important. A loose-fitting British imperial identity (as opposed to a more exclusive English Protestant form of imperial identity) had particular advantages for those Irish people who migrated to the settlement colonies in the nineteenth century, because it allowed them to pursue their own individual aims, supported by British imperial structures. As a result, Irish people were active participants in the construction of an imperial form of British identity in the colonial setting, and they frequently contested the narrower vision of British identity which was exclusively Protestant and English.⁵¹

⁵¹ I am grateful for the support of Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge, where I was a research fellow when the original conference paper was written, and the School of History, Keele University, where I was a lecturer when the chapter was revised.