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Kathleen Burk. *The Lion and the Eagle. The Interaction of the British and American Empires 1783-1972*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. ISBN: 9781408856178 (hardback, £30.00).

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Kathy Burk's big new book offers a comprehensive guide to certain territories of Anglo-American relations which, while well-known to specialists, have remained firmly in the background to most others. These include the definition of borders between Canada and the U.S., the Anglo-American war of 1812, and the confrontations over the opening up of China and Japan. The method used is classic diplomatic and geopolitical history: no concessions whatever are made to contemporary fashions in historiography or publishing. The point of view is always sympathetic to the policy-makers, even as they squabble and show all their limits. But such is the fluency of Professor Burk's thought and words, so effortless is her mastery of a mass of primary and secondary sources, that the book is a pleasure to read, perfect for that transatlantic flight, week-long cruise or short stay in hospital. Here one sees perhaps the influence of her Oxford tutor, A.J.P. Taylor, Britain's first celebrity, multi-media historian, whose biography Prof Burk published in 2002.¹

In contrast to her copious recent treatment of Anglo-American politics and society from the eighteenth century to the era of the Iraq war in *Old World, New World* (2009),² the key concept of the new book is *empire*. In a short introduction the author explains that the focus of her interest is on the formal interactions between the existing, already institutionalized British version of the late eighteenth century, and the formless American edition, which gradually rose up after the mid-nineteenth century. The overall period covered stretches from the Peace of Paris of 1783—the moment of Britain's first recognition of the existence of the United States as a distinct, legally established nation-state—to 1972, the year the British empire finally expired when lack of money forced it to drop its commitments to the defense of places 'east of Suez,' such as Aden and Singapore. But the text does not offer a steady chug through the decades from 1783 to 1972. Instead the substance is in four long chapters which take us down to 1895. The fifth and final chapter traces

¹ Kathleen Burk, *Troublemaker. The Life and History of A.J.P. Taylor* (London: Yale University Press, 2002).

² Burk, *Old World, New World. The Story of Britain and America* (London: Abacus, 2009).

the downward curve of the British empire, and how the Americans responded to this reality. But here the narrative suddenly accelerates, skating at frightening speed over a huge mass of crucial events and changes, leaving the reader at the end breathless and wondering over a whole series of unanswered questions. A very brief 'envoi' offers no further reflection on the meaning of it all, but instead lists the overseas possessions and dependencies of the UK and U.S. which still exist.

A summary of the book's contents, in well over 400 pages of text (plus a further 100 of notes and bibliography), would be invidious. But certain themes do emerge clearly. On page 8, the author states in typically crisp fashion: "Empires always worry about their borders," and the first two chapters demonstrate how this form of geopolitical anxiety played out in the case of North America, specifically in the north-western and north-eastern corners of the not-then-united states. The two empires—the British and the American—"shared a common desire: to expand, and to deny expansion to the other" (12). Americans would invade Canada a dozen times over the sixty years from 1783, she notes, and the ultimate aim was always to drive the British from North America once and for all, and to be treated as international equals. The British for their part "wanted the Americans to realise that they were not" (55). The well-known war of 1812, explained in detail, has to be seen in this context. The most fascinating part of this story concerns not the many other armed skirmishes which took place before the Canada-U.S. border was finally settled in 1903, but the extreme physical and geographical difficulties the various concerned parties encountered as they struggled to decide where the key boundaries actually lay. International arbitration was introduced at one stage—even involving the Kaiser of Germany at one point—a novel method of conflict management.

One massive irritant in Anglo-American relations which emerged from this period of the Napoleonic wars, amply documented here, was the question of neutral rights on the high seas. The Brits could not abide the insistence of their American cousins on freedom to trade with whomsoever at all times, including nations Britain was currently fighting. This issue caused endless confrontations on the high seas through the nineteenth century, arose again during the First World War, was included in President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, and even made it into the Atlantic Charter of 1941. After then of course, the two nations were always on the same side.

It would have been good to know what the British made of the new creed of 'Manifest Destiny' when it was promulgated by a journalist in 1845, and gained such a rapid and enduring hold on the American public imagination. This was an open declaration of moral and political superiority of the American republic to its British ancestry, an ideological definition of national identity, as much as a geopolitical vision. But Professor Burk dwells exclusively on the specific geopolitics of the situation, which were indeed dramatic: "almost all of the western part of North America between Alaska and California" was at stake (131). But as she explains in detail, the Americans were hampered in their expansionist ambitions—as they would be until the start of the twentieth century—by their equally ideological prejudice against standing armies and navies. The first settlement of the Canadian border in 1846 did not prevent small conflicts breaking out later at its western and eastern ends, but the Americans did not have the armed power, nor the British the will or the interest to escalate these affairs into a full-scale confrontation. The Americans had to accept that they could not absorb Canada; the British that, with other much more significant conflicts going on in Europe and other parts of the world, they must learn to accommodate their breakaway ex-colonists.

It was one thing to accept the reality of this learning process in North America, quite another to be obliged to practice it in areas of European conquest such as East Asia, where the British were engaged in intense competition with Dutch, French, Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian ambitions from the end of the

eighteenth century onwards. Just because the Americans wanted only to trade and spread the Christian gospel, rather than control territory, this did not mean that they were less determined than the others to be present and exert influence. The resulting confrontations are described in great detail in the book's long third chapter, covering the years 1783-1914.

The Chinese, convinced of their essential civilizational superiority to the Western 'barbarians', were quite unprepared for the forcefulness with which the British, and then the Americans, drove on their crusade for commerce and religious conversion. When these imperialists decided by the mid-nineteenth century that the most profitable commodity they could trade was opium, the stage was set for the bitterest of battles with the Chinese authorities, who had long struggled to suppress any form of opium trade. As ever throughout the century, the British navy was the key factor in deciding who prevailed, and it was after an armed confrontation—the start of the 'Opium Wars'³—that the first of what the Chinese called the 'Unequal Treaties' was signed, in 1842. The Americans soon took advantage of it: "The Americans fully shared the British belief that the world ought to be open to their trade, and that those countries which did not necessarily agree had to be bullied into compliance" (189).

A second Opium War, driven on "primarily by greed," followed in 1860. Far more brutal and humiliating, it left enduring resentments and antagonisms, together with a sense among Chinese authorities of their impotence before the modern methods of trade and war practiced by the barbarians. But the Opium Wars were just the beginning: by the end of the nineteenth century China was subject to the great territorial division of the world set off by competing European imperialisms, with the Americans—unable to project armed power—simply demanding they be dealt into the game too, by means of the 'Open Door' philosophy. When a section of Chinese society, the anti-foreigner Boxer movement, tried to rebel, the whole country was treated to a devastating Eight Power invasion. But the Europeans realised that they could not control so vast a territory, and that commerce was to be preferred to war, under a 'spheres of influence' conception of managing Great Power rivalries in the area. The Americans for their part convinced themselves that 'diplomacy works for trade,' a conception which reflected a growing (though unfounded) concern among U.S. businessmen that the vast success of their nation's recent industrialization could not be contained within its boundaries.

By the 1850's the 'Manifest Destiny' concept was reaching out to the Pacific, with a grandiose vision of that ocean as an exclusive American 'lake.' But once more, the Americans found themselves up against the ubiquitous British empire in its various forms—especially the Navy—and the subsequent Anglo-American encounter in and over Japan is the subject of the book's fourth detailed chapter. Every international historian knows how in 1853 the Americans sent a group of four large, black steamships to 'open up' Japan, but few will be aware of the care the Navy took to combine hard and soft power for the occasion. "Everything to impress" included "huge quantities of champagne and vintage Kentucky bourbon...a pair of Colt six-shooters and a scale-model train to display US technological achievement." Chinese coolies and African Americans were present "to show the command of white over colour," and there were "uniforms and pageants as manifestations of American cultural supremacy" (231-232). In the short term the Japanese, deeply distrustful, showed no signs of getting the message. The British stood aside: China mattered more.

³ See Stephen R. Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 2018).

What subsequently happened to the black ships the text does not disclose. But it does state that the poor American representative on the spot could pass years without seeing an American naval vessel off Japanese shores, a reality which obviously weakened his prestige and leverage.

The narrative skillfully explains the containment strategy the Japanese had long practised to control the access of foreigners to their land, and how it was adapted to cope with the new arrivals and their steamships. The ruling elites quickly determined that they must humour the foreigners for as long as it took for the nation to learn their ways of war, to build a modern army and navy, and so throw them all out by force at the first available opportunity. The Emperor and his court were aware of what the British had done in India and China, and that other foreign powers were mobilizing, and so signed the first commercial treaty of its kind with the Americans in 1858: they appeared as the lesser evil. But “the anger against the forced opening of the country did not abate” (288), and ten years later, with the restoration of the Meiji dynasty to the Imperial court, a comprehensive strategy of defensive development gradually emerged, beginning with the dispatch of a huge mission to the U.S. and then Britain, in 1871. This was “instrumental in transforming Japan into a modern industrial nation,” says Burk, but “as far as diplomacy went...virtually nothing (was) accomplished” (323-324). By then a range of commercial treaties had come into being, but by the end of the century the Japanese were determined to revise these to reflect their new standing in the international system and obtain a status of equal dignity. The Great Powers of course stalled. Only in 1894 did the British, with much bigger worries on their plate, concede a new treaty, the Americans following soon after. As the author points out, both Japan and the U.S. were still only potential Great Powers, though no-one doubted that they would be leading protagonists of the twentieth century. As for Britain, then supreme, the only way was down.

Of course this was not openly acknowledged in 1900 (unless one counts Rudyard Kipling’s poem “Recessional”), and victory in the First World War only fed imperial appetites further. Burk has a fascinating vignette—sourced from Arnold Toynbee—of Prime Minister David Lloyd George musing aloud on all the territories Britain would take over in the Middle East: “Mesopotamia...yes...oil...irrigation...we must have Mesopotamia; Palestine...yes...the Holy Land...Zionism...we must have Palestine; Syria...h’m...what is there in Syria? Let the French have that.” Toynbee commented: ‘Lloyd George had left out the rights and wishes of the Arabs themselves’ (378).

Before all that, we have the rise of formal American imperialism in Latin America and the Pacific, yet without mentioning President Theodore Roosevelt, his world-view, or even the round-the-world publicity voyage of America’s new navy promoted by that American hero. The antagonisms with Britain over Venezuela and agreements over the Panama Canal are recounted in detail, as is the general British recognition by 1907 that “the contingency of war with the United States should be avoided at all hazards,” as the War Office put it (362).

The First World War of course made Britain a Middle Eastern power, driven on ‘by two emotions: fear and greed,’ so how to reconcile these impulses with Wilson’s fantastical, deeply suspect, ideas of a ‘League of Nations,’ under which legalistic procedures would substitute the balance of power in conflict management? Fortunately for the British, Wilson turned out to be much less radical than feared when it came to managing colonial peoples, a reformer not a liberator.

The 1920’s, in Burk’s view, were dominated by naval questions (not finance), the 1930’s by the consequences of ‘isolationism,’ specifically the refusal of the Americans to make any contribution to the maintenance of world peace, i.e. the safety of the British empire. When world peace did finally break down in 1939, it became

clear that far from guaranteeing the British empire, the Americans were determined to get rid of it, and all the other European versions, and put themselves in charge of a vast programme of world reform.

Here the limits of Burk's narrow, formalistic approach to these Anglo-American relations become clear. American enmity to the British empire in World War II was not simply the product of traditional Anglophobia, but the expression of a vast debate across U.S. public opinion about why it was that the Europeans had started another world war only 20 years after the end of the first one, and the widespread conviction that the ancient European—not just British—traditions of imperialism, feudalism, monarchies, balances of power, class war and so on, had repressed the rightful desires of peoples everywhere to get access to the fruits of industrial progress. Wendell Willkie's *One World* of 1943, a vast best-seller, was the supreme expression of this point of view.⁴ From this conviction came Roosevelt's conferences which launched the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Bretton Woods system, and above all the United Nations (UN), all of which reflected a profound dedication to an idea of *economic development*, on the American model, as the key to world peace: that and a revised, post-Wilsonian definition of collective security.

The British of course understood the anti-imperial thrust of all this, but thought that their superior experience and presence in the world would sooner or later force the Americans to abandon their utopian fantasies, and Burk is at pains to show how this actually happened for a few short years after 1945. The Cold War found the U.S. unequipped to project geopolitical power everywhere, and forced to rely on occasion on the old British networks. The British, for their part, thought they could take advantage of this form of American dependence to prop up their system, and saw their share of the Marshall Plan—larger than anyone else's—as confirmation of this approach. Events in the Middle East in the 1950's, described in detail, finally destroyed this illusion, although Prof. Burk narrates later official American regret over the brutality of their attitudes during the Suez crisis, rather than former Secretary of State Dean Acheson's 1962 remark about the "British having lost an empire and not yet found a role."⁵ The story ends with Britain's late 1960's financial agonies, and the irreversible, shrinking effect these had on the nation's strategic presence in the world.

The book will flatter the conviction of the Brits that theirs is indeed a relationship with the U.S. unlike that of any other nation, not least because certain intelligence and strategic connections have always endured. Its most fascinating sections concern the daily coexistence of beleaguered diplomats and soldiers in the remote, inhospitable lands of China and Japan in the nineteenth century, and the formal consequences of their actions. By comparison, the final twentieth-century chapter moves too fast and skips over such great, revealing episodes as World War II in the Mediterranean, where the British and Americans spent more time, more intensely, fighting the war and managing its consequences together than anywhere else. There the Americans could see very clearly that Britain was over-stretched and exhausted. That was one reason the Marshall Planners pressed the Brits so hard to use their aid for general productive renewal, and hence lead by example their plan for western European economic integration (also a deeply-rooted idea from the Washington of World War II). Of course London resisted these pressures, and others accompanying the Marshall Plan, with great determination, as Prof Burk recounts in her *Old World, New World*. Income from the aid was used to

⁴ Wendell Willkie, *One World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943).

⁵ "Speech at West Point (5 December 1962); reprinted in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 29, 6 (1 January 1963), 163.

pay wartime debts, and in part rebuild currency reserves, in the phase when the British still thought they could rebuild their superpower status. But the Americans were right, and the British soon paid the price of their delusions.

Prof Burk is a ‘realist,’ in the terms of classical IR theory. She clearly suggests that the definition of a true empire is its ability to project military power, and wage war, anywhere in the world. She makes no value judgments, has no truck with ‘soft power’ notions, and is not at all interested in the interplay between a nation’s domestic politics and its foreign policy choices, or between its economic interests and its world presence. Unlike the theorists, she argues that individual policy-makers, even diplomats, have left distinctive marks on the behavior of their nations in the history of international affairs. The innumerable texts on Anglo-American relations produced hitherto have for the most part been produced by British historians; combining an American background with long exposure to the ways of the Foreign Office by teaching in London, hers is a trans-Atlantic outlook of a distinctive kind. Many will find its perspective too narrow. But as her mentor, Taylor, once said, what he was interested in was ‘what happened next and how.’ This book is a splendid tribute to that approach.

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