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Kathleen Burk. *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America from the Beginning.*

London: Little Brown Book Group, 2007 and New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008. xvii + 797 pp. £25 (cloth), £14.99 (paper), and \$35 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-0-87113-971-9.

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Sally Marks**, Independent Historian

A Special History of the Special Relationship

Kathleen Burk has undertaken the gargantuan task of surveying five centuries of Anglo-American relations, official and otherwise, “from the beginning.” As she points out, that has not been done before, even by Sir Winston Churchill whose four volume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, which ends in 1900, discusses one country and then the other instead of addressing issues between them. Burk, who does not romanticize, asks why the Anglo-American relationship is different from any other bilateral one between states—which it undoubtedly is at least in terms of one globally dominant power handing off peacefully to its offspring – and seeks to provide “a many-layered history of the relationship.” (xiii)

Burk aspires to write prose which is not detectable as either British or American. As the book was initially published in London, its spelling and punctuation are British. For the rest, American readers are likely to assume she is British whereas Britons may suspect she is American. In fact, dual citizenship is among her many qualifications, including several works on Anglo-American relations, especially financial. She often describes American policy from a British viewpoint and sometimes examines British policy with American eyes. This is no doubt salutary for readers in both countries.

British history has of course long been routinely offered in American universities. The reverse is not true. Within living memory, American researchers at the Public Record Office (as it was) were often greeted by British counterparts with, “Why do you study our history? We know you have none of your own, but why study ours?” Educated Americans know Britain has a long history but may not have studied it. Burk, who is

addressing the Intelligent General Reader (a very determined one), does not assume much knowledge in either direction, especially of North American geography.

Given its heft, *Old World, New World* is more likely to be read by academics who may learn little about their special period in their own country (or the one they teach) but who at a minimum will discover a new emphasis or viewpoint in areas where their knowledge is less exhaustive. For example, Burk stresses the geographic origins of British settlers in the New World and why this matters. She also puts the War for American Independence in its international context, pointing out that for Britain it quickly became secondary to the global struggle simultaneously in progress.

Burk's style is clear, entertaining and often piquant but thoroughly substantive. A stickler for accuracy, she did her own extensive research, a good deal of it archival, over seven years. Aside from misdating a few presidential terms to coincide with election years, she is largely error-free. Footnotes are numerous, often substantive, and sometimes enlivening. An eighteenth century recipe for rum punch requiring a hot poker and the Web URL for the original 1780 melody used with the poem which is now the American national anthem are among the tidbits tucked into footnotes. How to tar and feather a foe is explained in the text itself. The bibliography is impressive, the maps interesting, and the price (\$35 or £25) modest for nearly 800 pages. Numerous illustrations, primarily portraits ranging from Powhatan through notables official and unofficial to the Beatles and a cartoon featuring Donald Duck, add a good deal.

In covering five centuries, periodization, not surprisingly, is distinctive. Aside from 1763-83, chapters cover extended stretches, and some are very long, though divided into sections. Each chapter – and sometimes an individual section – begins with a collection of quotations from contemporary figures. These are to the point and often amusing. Professors will grab them to enliven lectures and to use for essay questions. Each chapter is also introduced by a pithy summary of its contents to guide readers through thickets ahead. These too provide potential quotable quotes for essay questions. Burk has a remarkable ability to distill complex problems to their essentials, often in a single sentence. She can even do this in her own specialty of financial history. Those who have conscientiously avoided the financing of the two world wars need duck no longer. Burk shines a clear light on both.

Wisely, Burk sticks closely to her topic, avoiding side alleys. Thus she discusses Anglo-Texan relations during Texas's decade of independence but not the Mexican War. Churchill's account of the American Civil War is chiefly battles. Burk ignores these in favor of the *Trent*, the *Alabama*, British attitudes, and the question of mediation. Oddly, she mentions the Emancipation Proclamation but not its diplomatic context.

The concentration on diplomatic relations is twice broken by chapters, three in number, addressing other aspects of the Anglo-American relationship. Two of these are sandwiched between a lengthy chapter on British-American tension (1783-1872) and

another (1871-1945) on gradual rapprochement. The first, on travelers in both directions, notes that, after independence, several generations of Americans continued to see Britain as the old country and to identify British history with American history. The other chapter, on everyday life, ranges widely, including economics and financial relations and noting that authors such as Samuel L. Clemens preferred to publish in England where they obtained appreciation and royalties instead of in the United States, which lacked a copyright law until 1891. In many respects, America's cultural relationship to London in the nineteenth century seems comparable to that of some Dominions and former colonies in the twentieth. Burk stresses that while British and American interests diverged, they were often closer than with other states and that around 1900 the idea rose that, though different, the two countries were each more like the other than any other nation.

The third non-diplomatic chapter follows the lengthy rapprochement and addresses Anglo-American marriages in both directions charmingly and in surprisingly substantive ways. We receive not only very lively accounts of Jennie Jerome, Consuelo Vanderbilt, and Wallis Simpson, but also an extensive discourse on British agricultural decline, resentment on both sides of the Atlantic, and British social history, including anger at what Britons called "the American sin" (547) of birth control which allegedly depleted the ranks of the aristocracy. In addition, Burk traces the hostility of both governments to World War II marriages of G.I.s to British girls and the U. S. Army's hair-raising treatment of war brides who played their own role in the special relationship.

On the whole, Burk's treatment of America's emergence as a world power is excellent. She notes that it acquired an empire without seeing itself as an imperial power. Some American readers will be startled and perhaps deflated by the verdict that in World War I the contribution of American troops on a quiet part of the front was slight but of psychological importance – and would have mattered greatly had the war continued. Burk gives full credit to the vital American provision of supplies and funds, noting that the war ended Britain's global financial dominance and made the United States "the supreme international financial power, and she would remain so for the rest of the century," (449)

Burk is undoubtedly correct in judging that the United States was reluctant (outside Latin America) in the interwar era to assume its responsibilities as a world power, but perhaps she is a trifle severe about its inaction during the Manchurian crisis of 1931-2. True, in a Depression and a presidential election year, President Herbert Hoover strongly opposed American military action in an area not of vital American interest though only the United States had a fleet in Pacific waters to send against Japan. However, in a situation similar to the much criticized French military inaction after the 1936 German remilitarization of the Rhineland, 'would not' was reinforced by 'could not'. In view of acute American disarmament, the U.S. Navy simply lacked the requisite numerical superiority to challenge its Japanese counterpart successfully in the western Pacific.

In a different vein altogether, Burk raises another case of would not/could not, this time of confusion between the two which contributed to strained Anglo-American relations in the 1930s and to Neville Chamberlain's well-known disdain for Franklin Roosevelt. The highest levels of the British government did not understand the American system of separation of powers. Unaware that the Congress is independent of the executive branch and that power in it is local – in the individual states or electoral districts –, they drew on their own experience and assumed that when Democrats controlled both houses of Congress, FDR could do whatever he pleased. When he could not do as they wished, they blamed and distrusted him. How long this confusion lasted in Whitehall is not clear, but it lingered among educated Britons long after World War II and operated in both directions. Americans newly resident in Britain did not automatically realize that, except on rare occasions, the Mother of Parliaments does not legislate but rather rubber stamps. But questions from British friends during a minor American crisis about “Why doesn't the president pass a law?” accelerated the learning curve for both parties. In any event, Burk has done a signal service in pointing out a complication of importance.

In dealing with World War II, Burk emphasizes the unprecedented unity of command and Anglo-American integration of innumerable lower organizations. On the whole, however, her account takes on a British viewpoint as Britain's comparative power waned, including an unvarnished report of Roosevelt's gratuitously brutal humiliation of Churchill at Teheran when FDR decided to cultivate Stalin. She stresses that World War II marked the transition from British global predominance to American and that Britain passed on its own self-righteousness to a United States which saw itself as a chosen people with “the God-given task of promoting liberty and democracy” (527) and which equated its interests to those of mankind, causing arrogance, mercilessness, and unwillingness to compromise – a judgment which, for some, will have contemporary resonance.

In addressing the second postwar, Burk does not minimize Britain's parlous condition. She also makes clear that the United States was feeling its oats and determined to have its way. But she is both gentle and generous about America's imperious arrogance in the late 1940s in decreeing British and French policy – apparently without the slightest comprehension in Washington of the painful humiliation of being a recently deposed great power rapidly losing its remaining assets. France, whose wartime relationship with the United States was complicated and rocky, reacted sharply. London was more restrained, whether from remembrance of wartime camaraderie, need of protection (especially before it joined Europe) or both. Burk's restraint continues through the various ups and downs (such as the Suez crisis) of an increasingly asymmetrical relationship to the start of the Iraq war, noting that Margaret Thatcher was not a subordinate but her successors were.

In a very brief conclusion Burk points to common ideals, approaches and interests leading to close links, especially diplomatic and military, and reiterates that both states believe that, despite differences, they are “more alike than any other two powers on the globe” ,

adding that “there is a true love-hate Anglo-American special relationship.” (659) Although Burk has documented many strains and difficulties through the centuries, perhaps “acute exasperation” would be more accurate than “hate”, of which she has demonstrated little. She has certainly and impressively produced the promised many-layered history of the relationship but perhaps will leave some readers seeking further explanation of why in the era of American domination Britain (along with Canada) has been its most steadfast ally. In any event, the work is a remarkable accomplishment. Together with its other virtues, it will perhaps lay the basis for another intrepid scholar to undertake a survey of the trilateral special relationship of Britain, Canada, and the United States.

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