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**Marc-William Palen. "Protection, Federation, and Union: the Global Impact of the McKinley Tariff upon the British Empire, 1890-94." *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 38:3 (September 2010): 395-418. DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2010.503395.**

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Review by **Edmund Rogers, University of Toronto**

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As the global financial collapse of 2007 sent journalists, politicians, and economists scurrying back to 1929 and the ensuing "Great Depression" for object lessons in appropriate policy responses, the United States' infamous Smoot-Hawley Tariff of 1930 received its fair share of attention. The common wisdom is that America's shift to extreme protectionism worsened the already considerable effects of the interwar "credit crunch" by shrinking the bounds of international trade: the American market was closed to countries desperately needing to export there, whilst the new tariff schedule also encouraged retaliation. Smoot-Hawley thus became a byword for a selfish and self-defeating trade policy during a period of global economic gloom.

Forty years prior to that controversial statute, the United States had earned considerable international opprobrium for a similarly bold protective trade measure. The McKinley Tariff of 1890 shocked statesmen and commentators in Europe and across the English-speaking world, not just for the punitive character of its import duties, but also for the underlying national ambition: to force other countries into reciprocal trading arrangements with the United States, thus giving American exporters privileged access to lucrative external markets. As was the case with Smoot-Hawley, the McKinley Tariff struck during a period of commercial depression, as low agricultural prices and increased global competition placed tremendous pressure on many national economies.

Marc-William Palen has performed an immensely valuable service in examining the reception of the McKinley Tariff across the British Empire, and its contribution to agitation in the early 1890s for an imperial trade system and even formal imperial political federation. The primary historiographical innovation he puts forward is the taking of a "global historical approach" to American trade policy and the imperial federation movement, which have otherwise been studied largely in isolation as aspects of American

and British imperial history, respectively. From the late 1840s, Britain devoted itself to a system of unilateral free trade, abandoning not only the principle of protection for domestic producers, but also preferential treatment for goods imported from imperial territories. “Responsible government” in Canada, extended to Britain’s colonies in Australia and New Zealand in the 1850s, meant that the Empire’s fast-growing settler societies were left free to pursue independent trade policies without regard to imperial considerations. McKinley added to the economic and geopolitical case against this state of affairs.

Over the past decade, the “British World” and “Greater Britain” have become established concepts within British and imperial historiography.<sup>1</sup> Palen’s article exemplifies how they can be fruitfully integrated into global and diplomatic history, as well as individual national histories. It is reminiscent of Miles Taylor’s revealing essay on the British Empire during the revolutionary year of 1848, which similarly took the reader across the globe as it followed the chain of social and political upheavals in lands under British governance.<sup>2</sup> Palen ties together the British, West Indian, South African, Australian, and Canadian responses to McKinley, overlaying them with the private interactions and high level deliberations of imperial statesmen concerning imperial unity. Most welcome of all, Palen explores not just the contact between Britain and the colonies regarding McKinley and imperial unity, but also the communication *between* colonies, as in the case of Cecil Rhodes and his contact with Sir John Macdonald in Canada and Sir Henry Parkes in New South Wales (401). Although Palen refers to “periphery” and “metropole”, his article is actually closer to the more multipolar approaches developing within imperial historiography (400).<sup>3</sup>

The McKinley Tariff did, as Palen argues, help to “call into question” the wisdom of free trade in Britain. Undeniably, it greatly heightened pre-existing anxieties about the powerlessness of unilateral “free imports” to maintain the security of Britain’s overseas markets in the face of a rapacious American reciprocity drive. But McKinley only led fiscal reformers to develop greater indignance, not new ideas or efficacious political traction. As Palen goes on to explain in his conclusion, the agitation for “fair trade” and imperial commercial unity was ultimately unsuccessful, although Joseph Chamberlain revived it in 1903 and persuaded the bulk of the Conservative party to back “tariff reform” (409). What

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London: F. Cass, 2003); Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, 1876-1922* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003); Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis, eds., *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005); Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, C.1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Miles Taylor, “The 1848 Revolutions and the British Empire,” *Past & Present* 166:1 (2000): 146-80.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Lester, “Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire,” *History Compass* 4:1 (2006): 124-41; Simon J. Potter, “Webs, Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Empire,” *Journal of British Studies* 46:3 (2007): 621-46.

arguably stands out most about the British response to McKinley is how little it changed the attitudes of the dedicated free traders in the civil service, and the Liberal and Conservative parties. McKinley caused no mass conversions of free traders. *The Times* was certainly angry about the tariff – both free traders and protectionists had that anger in common – but the newspaper did not abandon its advocacy of free trade, and though its editorial line was imperial in sentiment, it shared the Conservative leadership’s scepticism of the grand political projects envisioned by the Imperial Federation League (399). Most remarkable perhaps is the manner in which Liberals were able to use McKinley to reinforce their arguments for free trade. In their highly moralistic rhetoric, “McKinleyism” became a catch-all term for protectionist America’s corrupt interest politics and selfishness in international relations, something I have explored elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> To what extent was this also true of free traders in Canada and other self-governing colonies, particularly New South Wales where free trade was a popular political idea?

Palen refers to Britain’s “free trade” empire, which in this context denotes the combination of the United Kingdom’s unilateral policy of “free imports” with the lack of co-ordination or co-operation in imperial trade matters. However, the term rather obscures the mixture of fiscal systems within the Empire. The author could arguably have paid more attention to colonial protectionism, which not only mirrored the fiscal assumptions behind McKinley, but also greatly complicated the question of imperial commercial unity. Canada and Victoria, in particular, applied heavy import duties on manufactures to protect domestic industries. If the United Kingdom was to give preference to the food and raw materials exported by its colonies, should not British manufacturers receive preferential treatment in colonial markets?

A broad point raised by Palen’s article is that whilst a transnational perspective is essential to achieving a more well-rounded history, it should not totally displace national peculiarity. The defeat of reciprocity in Canada’s 1891 election had as much to do with low voter turnout and the vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system as any popular imperialist surge against freer trade with America; indeed, the Liberals polled better than they had in the previous federal contest. And it is always important to recognise national diversity. “Canadian eyes” may have drifted away from the United States towards the Empire, but this rather overlooks the fact that Canadian-American reciprocity was once again an election issue in 1896, and on that occasion the Liberals won (406).

Overall, Palen has crafted an informative and clearly written article, well-focused yet of admirable scope, that successfully unites American and imperial histories through a multilateral and multilayered approach. Although his study ends at a climactic point of imperial significance, with the Intercolonial Conference at Ottawa in 1894, he could easily have continued beyond that year. The McKinley Tariff was universally perceived to have taken American protectionism to previously unreached heights, but the 1897 Dingley Tariff was almost as controversial, reinforcing the perception of the United States as a fiscal

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<sup>4</sup> Edmund Rogers, “The United States and the Fiscal Debate in Britain, 1873-1913,” *Historical Journal* 50:3 (2007): 593-622.

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fortress voraciously pursuing external markets. The imperial issues potentially surrounding Dingley's fresh demonstration of American protectionism flow naturally from the 1890-1894 period. The tariff came after the 1896 victory of a Canadian Liberal Party that had campaigned for reciprocity with the United States, and it was soon followed by the South African War and Australian federation at the turn of the century, both examples of colonial consolidation. This reviewer excitedly awaits the possibility that Palen might pursue the interconnection between American protectionism and imperial unity yet further.

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