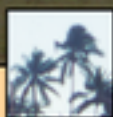


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W. DAVID McINTYRE

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Winding up the British Empire in the Pacific Islands

W. David McIntyre

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Foreword

The purpose of the five volumes of the Oxford History of the British Empire was to provide a comprehensive survey of the Empire from its beginning to end, to explore the meaning of British imperialism for the ruled as well as the rulers, and to study the significance of the British Empire as a theme in world history. The volumes in the Companion Series carry forward this purpose. They pursue themes that could not be covered adequately in the main series while incorporating recent research and providing fresh interpretations of significant topics.

Wm. Roger Louis

Preface

'I think we can all agree that where colonialism or imperialism has been the most significant political fact of man's history, the rapid closing out of the colonial era must surely be the milestone of twentieth-century politics'. This statement to the United Nations Trusteeship Committee by Robert Rex, the Leader of Government Business in Niue, one of the world's smallest countries, neatly encapsulates the context of this book. After centuries of European territorial expansion and domination of most of the world, the dissolution of colonial Empires in the second half of the twentieth century occurred at a bewilderingly rapid pace. The speed with which the British Empire was dismantled was perhaps the most unexpected aspect. From Clement Attlee's announcement of the ending of the Raj in India in 1947, to Edward Heath's remark at Singapore in 1971 that the Empire was 'past history' was scarcely a quarter century.

Yet decolonization, as the process came to be called, was never simple. There were numerous territories that were deemed too small, too weak in resources, and too remote to be sovereign States. For years there were places of which it was said they could *never* be independent. There were some, like Niue itself, which never sought independence. As Rex told the UN, 'To us in Niue, independence and self-government have the same value'. To others, independence when it came did not seem real. 'The British allowed us to be independent', wrote Jonathan Fifi'i, one the first generation of Solomon Island ministers, 'The British didn't train us to be ready to develop our own country'. Foreigners were still imported to do many things. Naboua Ratieta, the first chief minister of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, described how lost they felt when left to rule themselves: 'We had no precedents to follow. We were a government of trial and error'. But because of the education they had had they often asked themselves what Gladstone or Disraeli would have said or done under such circumstances. To others there was eagerness to gain control of their destiny. For the King of Tonga, the first British Pacific dependency to gain independence, it was simply a matter of a 'return to the comity of nations'. For Toalipi Lauti, the first Prime Minister of Tuvalu, there was his insistence that, 'We will do things in our own way. Everything done in the colonial era is bad'.

For the British there was a sudden reordering of priorities. The policy of guiding colonial territories to 'responsible self-government within the Commonwealth' was announced during the Second World War with the rider that there must be a fair standard of living and freedom from oppression. By the 1960s, the policy had formalized to one of willingness to grant independence to those that 'want it and can sustain it', but not to force it on those that did not. Forward to the 1970s, and the Whitehall line had changed yet again: 'Our possession of these territories is a legacy of the past; we acquired them for historic reasons which are no longer valid'. Put more crudely, when a Solomon Island administrator requested help

with a minor aid application, it became: 'You must remember that Britain can't be bothered with these potty little places any more'.

The central question this book attempts to address is why the British government changed its mind about giving independence to the Pacific Islands. Why, after steadily maintaining that they were among the territories too small, remote, and poor to be independent, did the decision-makers in Whitehall adopt a policy of 'accelerated decolonization' and determine to 'wind up' the Empire in Oceania with such ruthless despatch? Answers are sought in relation to mainline decolonizations during the 1940s to 1960s. They are approached within the context best expressed by Wm Roger Louis as the need to weigh the relative impact of 'metropolitan infirmity, nationalist insurgency, and international interference'. There are, however, certain dilemmas in this approach that have to be admitted.

Foremost among them is the question of whether 'vertical' or 'horizontal' strategy is adopted; whether a top-down or a bottom-up approach is followed; whether island aspirations have precedence over metropolitan initiatives. Eleven new island States emerged after a century of British imperialism in the Pacific. They spread far across Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, and the colonial rulers included Australia and New Zealand as well as Britain. There were also two condominiums. Each of the eleven countries has its own unique history and trends in national and area studies suggest that these autonomous histories—traced 'vertically' as it were—provide the valid approach and give the most authentic picture of island life and aspirations. In Pacific history 'island-orientated investigation' became *de rigueur*. This book, however, takes a 'horizontal' path and tries to view the evolution of British policies cutting across the Pacific region as a whole, and only delves into the particular island stories at the crucial moments of transition. The aim is to observe policy-makers at any particular moment endeavouring to reach an overall view and adopt policies that have some coherence and are politically feasible.

In the early stages of decolonization new nations were expected to be of a certain size and status in order to have economic viability and be politically independent in the international community. The starting point was the British Commonwealth of Nations that had evolved, over a century, the highly successful arrangements known as representative and responsible government, and Dominion status. Large prosperous countries, Australia, Canada, and South Africa, had eventuated. New Zealand marked a sort of demographic bottom line. Its population when it gained Dominion status was just above a million. Cyprus's application to become a member of the Commonwealth with a population of under half a million introduced what seemed at the time to be an entirely new dimension. It was regarded as a dangerous precedent in 1960. But the announcement, at the very same moment, that Western Samoa, at only 100,000, was also about to be given independence, was dubbed a *reductio ad absurdum*. Even the United Nations Secretary-General began to wonder whether some qualification line based on population should be drawn. Yet the United Nations accepted that Nauru, a trust territory with only 5,500, should

be independent in 1968. Western Samoa and Nauru were, therefore, the precedents for the Pacific and their respective island leaders became influential role models for the island élites.

For mainstream decolonization primacy has usually been accorded to the impact of 'nationalist insurgency'. India's long campaign for self-government and sovereignty involved at times mass civil disobedience and considerable violence that was held down by force. Similar agitations followed in Africa; in Malaya there was communist insurgency. By contrast, the Pacific Islands were, with rare exceptions, peaceable and seemed, to colonial officers transferred from Africa, unusually quiescent. Moreover, island particularism precluded the type of nationalism focusing on territory and common identity that was evident elsewhere. Superficial, short-term observation could overlook deep strains of indigenous self-regard, even superiority. Gerald Hensley, a young New Zealand history graduate, who advised on self-government for Samoa, recalled the Constitutional Convention held in 1960 to approve the independence constitution. He depicted it as the 'last grand outing' of traditional Samoan politics. 'Most members had never sat in a parliamentary assembly before but they had all spent years in village councils where debate continued until a consensus was reached and a day could go placidly by discussing the trespasses of a pig... Samoan custom frowned on going baldly into an issue...'. Proceedings were endlessly prolonged. There was great concern that custom be preserved and the rights of village chiefs and orators be respected. 'This vigilance about chiefly rights was felt to be essential to ensure the unique Samoanness of the constitution. Such articulate conservatism was in fact a form of nationalism... these things were at the heart of their society, their traditions and their patriotism'. Michael Walsh, sent out by the Overseas Development Ministry as government economist to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, has recalled how similar meetings in Micronesia involved long respectful silences as content was absorbed and meditated on, only to be spoiled by excessive European talkativeness that precluded any genuine appreciation of indigenous points of view. Pacific Island identities are too subtle to be bracketed with 'nationalist insurgency' so this cannot be taken as the prime motive for winding up the Empire in Oceania. Yet the depth and tenacity of islander pride of culture and identity could certainly not be ignored. In place of nationalism of an Afro-Asian variety, the Pacific Islands nurtured deep-seated cultural re-assertion tendencies.

More important for the Pacific was metropolitan initiative, though not necessarily metropolitan *infirmity*. During mainstream decolonization, Britain strove for many years to maintain the role of a great power in alliance with the United States and focused on the Cold War. Concessions to strident colonial nationalists can be seen as attempts to court influence with the new States. By the 1960s, however, the role of financial and economic crises had a more immediate role in the withdrawal from east of Suez. One of the most hopeful ways out was seen as accession to the European Communities, and commentators have suggested that the withdrawal from east of Suez was the logical concomitant of the 'entry into Europe'. However, Andrea Benvenuti, who carefully analysed the importance for Australia of this

critical realignment, found that the two destinations lay at the end of separate tracks and there was no causal connection between them.

Yet 'withdrawal from east of Suez' became nonetheless an unavoidable part of the background to the winding up of the Empire in the Pacific. The usual back-up to British administrators was removed. The Pacific territories were left out on a limb. When force was needed to maintain security in the New Hebrides in 1980, commandos had to be flown out from Britain. The Royal Navy that had once policed the islands (albeit lightly) was conspicuously absent from Pacific independence celebrations. The most significant metropolitan change was the closure of the Colonial Office in 1966 by merger with the Commonwealth Relations Office, and the subsequent merger of the Commonwealth and Foreign Offices in 1968. The creation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is of quite fundamental significance. The remaining Pacific Dependent Territories Department (a joint unit shared with the Ministry of Overseas Development) was accorded a low priority by the former, if not the latter. Indeed, the Overseas Development staff was, if any body was, the inheritor of the Colonial Office's sense of responsibility in contrast with the more aloof diplomatists. Ex-colonial civil servants whose careers had started in Asia or Africa found that, on transfer to the FCO, assignment to the Pacific dependencies meant being placed among 'the odds and sods'. Diplomatic priorities lay behind the policy of 'accelerated decolonization', which was finally adopted, but not publicly announced, in 1975. This meant that in the final negotiations for Pacific Islands' independence considerable resentment was caused by the assignment of much of the work to officials when ministers from new States expected to be dealing with their British equivalents. As John Smith, the last governor of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, put it: 'Status was always a problem with the FCO. In Nigeria and Uganda the population of Tuvalu (and Kiribati too) would have been that of at best a small district. Understandably the FCO felt that a desk officer was about the right level but their visitors held delusions of grandeur'.

It was, of course, not just a matter of size and status. It was, more importantly, one of national standing. It was here that 'international interference' came into play, at least for a time. The changing membership of the United Nations in the 1960s, the Declaration on Colonialism, and the Special Committee on Colonialism transformed the whole context and found Britain, along with the rest of the colonial powers (except New Zealand and the Soviet Union) in the dock. Before the adoption of the policy of accelerated decolonization there was the search for a status for dependencies that was 'non-colonial', even the suggestion that the UN might assume a general trusteeship over mini-states. In the event, when the UN was invited to observe the Ellice Islands separation referendum, its visiting team expressed some understanding of the special problems of a small, remote, poorly resourced country. But the force of anti-colonialism was undoubtedly strong and so became a prime motive for accelerated decolonization. The FCO wished to get the UN off its back on colonial issues. There was a growing concern that Britain needed to stand forth as a non-colonial power.

This book, then, is an exploration of this grand transition for the Pacific. Why were dependent territories held so long in the 'never' category suddenly ushered

out with such despatch in just ten years between 1970 and 1980? Who wrote the death warrant of the Empire and how was it actually wound up? Answers are sought at the colonial, metropolitan, and international levels. For this quest the writings of pioneer national leaders from the islands and memoirs by retired colonial administrators give insight into infinitely various colonial experiences; the recently opened files of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in the British National Archives reveal the tortuous evolution of policy; and the records of the United Nations, held by the British Library, indicate the huge impact that international anti-colonialism eventually had on British policy. The roles of Australia and New Zealand, whose island territories were an integral part of the Empire in Oceania, have also to be considered. While most of the best writing on decolonization to date focuses on Attlee's *ending of the Raj* and Macmillan's *wind of change*, with some recent attention given to Wilson's *withdrawal east of Suez*, this book puts the 'death warrant' rather later. The review begun by the Heath government in 1973 prompted *accelerated decolonization* which was brought to fruition by the later Callaghan and Thatcher governments.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the staffs of the National Archives, Kew, the British Library, Camden, Archives New Zealand, Wellington, and the Macmillan Brown Library for Pacific Studies at the University of Canterbury. I am also deeply grateful to those who read earlier drafts and gave generously of their experience: Ian Campbell, Wm Roger Louis, Barrie Macdonald, Doug Munro, David Murray, Gordon Parsonson, John Smith, Michael Walsh, and John Wilson. Terry Barringer assisted with the bibliography. The work could not have been completed without the generous hospitality, within walking distance of the British Library and the Overground to Kew, of Sonia Spurdle and Malcolm Hogg. Finally, my dear wife Marcia, who organized the computer and much else besides, cannot be thanked enough especially for unflagging, eagle-eyed proofreading and the index.

Christchurch, May 2013

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Abbreviations

AdCo	Advisory Council
ANZ	Archives New Zealand, Wellington
ANZUS	Alliance between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States
BDEEP, A2, <i>Lab. Gov. 1945–51</i>	British Documents on the End of Empire Project, Series A, vol. 2: <i>The Labour Government and the End of Empire, 1945–1951</i> , 4 vols. edited by R. Hyam, (London: HMSO, 1992)
BDEEP, A3, <i>Con. Gov. 1951–57</i>	Series A, Vol. 3. <i>The Conservative Government and the End of Empire, 1951–1957</i> , 3 vols. edited by D. Goldsworthy (London: HMSO, 1994)
BDEEP, A4, <i>Con. Gov. 1957–64</i>	Series A, Vol. 4. <i>The Conservative Government and the End of Empire 1957–64</i> , 2 vols. edited by R. Hyam and W. R. Louis, (London: TSO, 2000)
BDEEP, A5, <i>E. of Suez 1964–71</i>	Series A, Vol. 5. <i>East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964–71</i> , 3 vols. edited by S. R. Ashton and W. R. Louis (London: TSO, 2004)
BDEEP, B5, <i>Sudan</i>	Series B, Vol. 5. <i>Sudan</i> , 2 vols. edited by D. H. Johnson (London: HMSO, 1998)
BDEEP, B10, <i>Fiji</i>	Series B, Vol. 10. <i>Fiji</i> , edited by B.V. Lal (London: TSO, 2006)
BDEEP, B11, <i>Malta</i>	Series B, Vol. 11. <i>Malta</i> , edited by S. C. Smith, (London: TSO, 2006)
BSIP	British Solomon Islands Protectorate
CAB	Cabinet papers in National Archives
Chogm	Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings since 1971
CO	Colonial Office
col.	column
CPA	Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office
<i>Cwth Summit</i>	<i>The Commonwealth at the Summit</i> . I, <i>Communiqués of Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings 1944–1986</i> ; II, <i>1987–1995</i> (London: ComSec, 1987, 1997)
CwO	Commonwealth Office
DO	Dominions Office
DomTom	Départments Outre mer et Territoires Outre mer
FCO	Foreign & Commonwealth Office
FO	Foreign Office
fol.	folio number
GEIC	Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony

GBPP	<i>Great Britain Parliamentary Papers</i> including Reports from Committees and Command Papers [Cd., Cmd., or Cmnd.]
Gov-Gen.	Governor-General
Grenville	<i>The Major International Treaties 1914–1973: A History and Guide with Texts</i> , edited by J. A. S. Grenville (London: Methuen, 1974)
HC	High Commissioner
HCWP	High Commissioner for the Western Pacific
HC Deb. 5	<i>United Kingdom Parliamentary Debates: Official Report. Fifth series House of Commons</i> , with date, volume, column
HL Deb. 5	<i>House of Lords debates</i> with date, volume, column
ISG	Internal self-government
JICH	<i>Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History</i>
LAC	Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa
LMH	Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford
min.	minute
MoFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Wellington
mtg.	meeting.
NHC	Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides, abbreviated to New Hebrides Condominium
NZIIA	New Zealand Institute of International Affairs
NZJH	<i>New Zealand Journal of History</i>
NZPD	<i>New Zealand Parliamentary Debates</i>
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography [UK] from the Earliest Times to the Year 2000</i> , edited by H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, 60 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
OHBE	<i>The Oxford History of the British Empire</i> (5 vols.) editor-in-chief, W. R. Louis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997–99).
PAR	Performance Analysis and Review
PBA	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
PDTD	Pacific Dependent Territories Department, FCO
PMM	Prime Ministers' Meetings, 1944–69
PREM	Prime Ministers' Department papers in National Archives
PUS	Permanent Undersecretary.
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RIIA	Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House
STE	Smaller Territories Committee of Enquiry, 1949–51
TNA-PRO	The National Archives of England, Wales, and the United Kingdom, abbreviated to the National Archives, which, since 2003, has oversight of the former Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, London
TRT	<i>The Round Table</i>
TOPI	<i>Constitutional Relations between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power, 1942–1947</i> , 12 vols. edited by N. Mansergh et al. (London: HMSO, 1970–83) abbreviated to Transfer of Power in India
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNO	United Nations Organization
WPHC	Western Pacific High Commission

Note on Pronunciation

In Fijian

b is pronounced mb, as in number

c is pronounced th, as in that

d is pronounced nd, as in end

g is pronounced ng, as in sing

q is pronounced ng, as in finger

In Gilbertese

ng is pronounced as in singer

b is an unaspirated 'p'

ti is usually pronounced as 'si' (see),

but at the end of a word as in English, 's'

tu is pronounced as 'soo' in the northern Gilberts and 'too' in the south

w is pronounced as an English 'v' when followed by an e.

Prologue

Pacific Islanders marched proudly through the streets of London on 8 June 1946. During the parade to celebrate victory in the war that had disrupted many of their homelands, six contingents from Oceania saluted King George VI. After contingents from eighteen allied nations, led by the United States of America, and from the four self-governing Dominions came colourful representatives from India and from over forty parts of the colonial Empire. Then, under the rubric 'Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission' there appeared contingents of the Fiji Royal Naval Reserve, Fiji Infantry Regiment, Fiji Medical Corps, Tonga Defence Force, British Solomon Islands Defence Force, and Gilbert and Ellice Islands Defence Force. Only after this display of imperial power did the more numerous military and civilian services from the United Kingdom march past.

This visible symbol of the world's greatest Empire came at the fleeting peak of its territorial span. Although it sustained critical losses of territory in the dark days of 1940–42, these—and much more—were all recovered. In Europe, the Channel Islands had been lost and Malta threatened. In Africa, Egypt was invaded and British Somaliland occupied. In Southeast Asia, the fall of Singapore marked the greatest humiliation since American Independence. Malaya, Burma, North Borneo, Sarawak, and Hong Kong all succumbed to the Japanese, who went on to penetrate northeast India and bomb its eastern coast as well as Ceylon. In the Pacific, the northern Gilbert Islands, Nauru, the larger Solomon Islands, Bougainville, the Bismarck Archipelago, and northeast New Guinea were also occupied by Japan.

The victories celebrated in 1946 included recovery of all these losses, but British forces advanced far beyond the imperial frontiers. In Europe, a quarter of Germany was placed under British military administration. In the Middle East, British forces gained sway from Tripoli to Tehran, from Athens to Aden, and from Cyprus to Somalia. There was even a move to make Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in Libya, a British trust territory. In the Horn of Africa not only was British Somaliland recovered, but Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Italian Somaliland were occupied and a project mooted to unite them in a 'Greater Somalia'. In Southeast Asia, having recovered Malaya, British forces went on to receive the Japanese surrender in southern French Indo-China and then to occupy the Dutch East Indies. In the Japanese homeland, the British Commonwealth Occupation Force included units from Australia, Britain, India, and New Zealand. The year 1946 marked the unique zenith of Britain's imperial reach.

Any feelings of grandeur that the marching columns may have prompted in the jubilant crowds on London streets were, however, based on illusion. On the Empire's Pacific fringes, the main effort in recovering the Gilbert Islands, Nauru,

and the Solomon Islands had been by the United States. And even before the glorious parades in June, there had been three events in 1946 laden with prophetic portent for the Empire.

Firstly, on 10 January 1946 the opening session of the United Nations General Assembly met in the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster. Delegates from fifty-one countries heard Prime Minister Clement Attlee welcome them with brisk, colourless words suggesting that their task of 'creating permanent conditions for peace', would demand the same sense of urgency, self-sacrifice, and 'willingness to subordinate sectional interests to the common good' as had been necessary to win the war. In the gestation of the UN Charter there had been wide-ranging debates about the future of colonies. The Trusteeship Council—a major organ of the UN that did not meet until the following year—was designed to deal primarily with former enemy territories, but the wartime debates threw up the portentous suggestion that there should be accountability to the international body for *all colonies*. Britain resisted these ideas, but the Charter contained the 'Declaration regarding non-self-governing territories'. The labels 'Colony', 'Protectorate', and 'Empire' were avoided. The said territories were places 'whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-government' where 'administering countries' had accepted the obligation, as a 'sacred trust', to respect indigenous cultures, pursue political, economic, social and educational advancement, and develop self-government and free institutions. And, according to a premonitory final rubric, they were to transmit regularly to the Secretary-General statistical and other information. The existence of the United Nations thus became an unavoidable part of the context of colonial affairs that had to be taken into account.

The second event in 1946 was Winston Churchill's famous Iron Curtain speech at Fulton, Missouri, where he highlighted the single most significant element of the post-war situation—that the USA stood 'at the pinnacle of world power' which involved 'awe inspiring accountability'. Churchill made two proposals: that each member state should be invited to contribute air squadrons for service with the United Nations, and the 'fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples' including permanent defence co-operation between the USA and 'all British Commonwealths with full reciprocity'. The shadow of the Communist International had fallen over the recent scenes of victory. There needed to be a new unity in Europe 'from which no nation should be permanently outcast'. He believed that the Soviet Union sought not war but the fruits of war. He claimed that if the 'English-speaking Commonwealths' were added to the United States 'there will be no quavering' and the balance of power would be safe. Together they must adhere faithfully to the UN Charter.

A similar theme of American supremacy, Soviet threat, and British reliance on the USA was accepted at the third event in 1946—the first post-war Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting held in April–May and which spent several days talking about the Pacific. They accepted that the Soviet Union was their only likely enemy and Britain could not be defended except by the United States. In the Pacific, where it acquired supreme power, America had for several years contemplated a string of bases to enable its forces to meet any contingencies. Many colonial territories of

Britain, Australia, and New Zealand featured in the American wish lists—Western Samoa, the Line Islands, the Phoenix Islands, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, the Solomon Islands, the Admiralty Islands, the New Hebrides—all were mentioned from time to time. There was even a suggestion that Betio Atoll in the Gilbert Islands, where thousands of Americans had been killed in a single day, should be gifted as a US memorial. The Commonwealth prime ministers agreed with Attlee that this was not on. But the British chiefs of staff accepted an Australian idea that if the Americans could be committed to peacetime defence co-operation in the South Pacific, a bases deal was worth considering.

The second subject that came up was the welfare of Pacific Islanders. The meeting accepted another Australian proposal that the colonial powers in the region should form a South Seas Regional Commission to pool experience in island administration, and collaborate in health, educational, economic, and political development with a view to promoting self-government in line with the UN trusteeship principle.

When Oceania was again represented on the streets of London during the coronation of 1953, the Empire had already changed dramatically. Oceania's representative this time was Salote Tupou III, Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire, the Order of St Michael and St George, and of the Royal Victorian Order, Queen of Tonga since 1918, who hit the world's headlines as she rode in an open carriage in pouring rain with cheerful smiles and friendly waves. She heard Queen Elizabeth II take her vows, no longer as Empress of India but as 'Head of the Commonwealth'. India, one-time jewel in the crown, had been partitioned into independent India and Pakistan, one now a republic, the other a Dominion. Ceylon was also a Dominion, but Burma, another republic, had quit the Commonwealth, as had Éire or Ireland, now the Republic of Ireland. Decolonization had made a dramatic start, though it would take another quarter-century before the process was completed in Oceania.

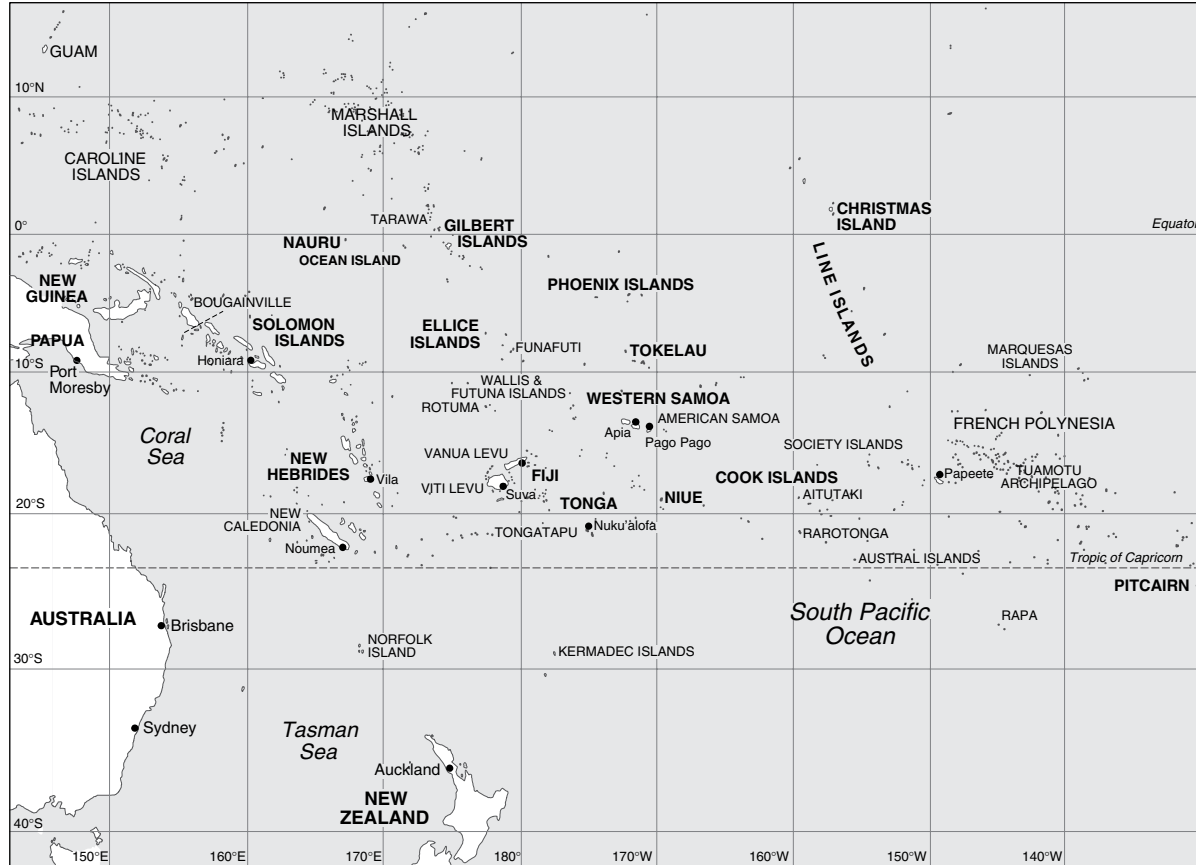
Also coinciding with the opening of the second Elizabethan age was the publication of the best-known book about the Pacific. Sir Arthur Grimble's *A Pattern of Islands*, based on a series of BBC broadcasts about life in the Gilbert Islands, was published in 1952, and was later adopted as a school certificate English literature text. For many people this book was their sole source of information about the 'South Seas'. Born in Hong Kong in the Victorian age, Grimble had become a cadet with the Western Pacific High Commission. Arriving in 1914 on Ocean Island, then seat of the government of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorate, Grimble lived for years as a district officer on the farthest periphery of Empire. There he studied those contrasts of culture and mutual incomprehension about nuances of language that were the most notable characteristics of what came to be called 'colonialism'. He was warned by his superior officer that an attitude of humble attentiveness was in order. 'You may walk round the villages satisfied you're a hell of a fellow, while all the time they're

thinking what a mannerless young pup you are...yes, and forgiving you, and staying loyal in spite of everything...go and learn a bit about them. Yours is the honour, not theirs'.

Pictures of Queen Salote and the memories of Arthur Grimble conveyed a view of the Islands that was quite out of date. The Empire had already moved some distance along the path to dissolution. Yet it was, in the minds of many, still going strongly. It was not until the mid-1970s that the policy of 'accelerated decolonization' was adopted for the Pacific dependent territories. The major theme of this book, then, is why Empire lingered so long on its farthest periphery and why, eventually, it was wound up so quickly.

PART I

OCEANIA OVERVIEW



1

‘Imperialism, as such, is a Newly Coined Word’ Empire and Oceania

At that fleeting moment of territorial zenith in 1946, the British Empire consisted of some seventy dependencies, which, in John Darwin’s view, seemed to lack any logic and gave the appearance of ‘a pile of possessions whose purpose or meaning was long since forgotten’.¹ In the Pacific, there were two sovereign Dominions (Australia and New Zealand), each with its own colonial dependencies; two crown colonies (Fiji, and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands); a Protectorate (the British Solomon Islands), and a protected state (the Kingdom of Tonga); two condominiums (the New Hebrides, and Canton & Enderbury); two trust territories administered by the Dominions (Western Samoa by New Zealand; New Guinea by Australia) and one joint trust territory, Nauru (of Australia, New Zealand, UK, administered by Australia); the Western Pacific High Commission giving a loose oversight; three claimant territories in Antarctica (by Australia, New Zealand, and UK); and a host of very small islands with Pitcairn the first European island colony as the remotest British outlier. Scattered as they were over the vast ocean, they were home to 2 per cent of the Empire’s total population.

The remnant of this island Empire that was wound up so quickly in the ten years between 1970 and 1980, took five times as long to acquire. In the half-century from the first offer of Fiji in 1858 to the capture from Germany of Western Samoa, Nauru, north-east New Guinea, the Admiralty Islands, and the northern Solomon Islands, these remote places became the most distant and isolated outposts of British imperialism. Yet in spite of their small size and relative insignificance, the Pacific Islands have their unique place in the story of decolonization—one of the great recent transitions of global history. Of the 192 member countries in the United Nations by the first decade of the twenty-first century, 143 (roughly three-quarters) were former European colonies, of which 70 were once under some form of British rule. John Darwin argues that throughout most of history *empire* has been the ‘default mode’ of political organization.² In the half-millennium from

¹ J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 2.

² J. Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (London: Allan Lane, 2007), p. 23.

John Cabot's first voyage to Newfoundland in 1497 to the retrocession of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the British Empire grew to be the largest and most powerful of the empires. It ended remarkably speedily and mainly peacefully during the half-century after 1945. A resulting legacy is the Commonwealth of fifty-four countries, which represents the distinctive British contribution to decolonization.

Echoing Adam Smith's 1776 gibe that the then British Empire was merely 'the project of an empire' Darwin has suggested that in its heyday it was 'largely a sham'. The 'British world system', as he prefers to call it, 'had no logic at all'.³ At its peak of power and influence in the mid-Victorian age, it was a legacy of three centuries of maritime, missionary, trading, and colonial activities, which may look illogical, but can be explained historically as the product of two trading networks focusing on the 'West Indies' and the 'East Indies'. In the Caribbean islands of St Kitts, Barbados, and Jamaica the British found their first great sources of colonial wealth, followed by larger colonies on the North American littoral, both partly based on slave labour from West Africa. Capital, manufactures, shipping, and people came from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland as well as Africa to form what came to be called the 'First British Empire'. It was an Atlantic system. The Pacific figured only as a projected route to untold riches in China and site of the great southern continent, *Terra Australis Incognita*, foretold in the theories of Tudor mathematician Dr John Dee (1527–1608/09). But with the loss of thirteen North American colonies, the abolition of the slave trade, and then of slavery, the remnant by the mid-nineteenth century consisted of the Dominion of Canada (created in 1867), fifteen Caribbean colonies, four West African settlements, and some remote Atlantic islands. Even before the loss of the 'First Empire' in America, the development of 'Eastern Trades' in the Indian Ocean and beyond became the focus for the 'Second British Empire' which overlapped with it. The three great voyages of Captain James Cook in the Pacific drew Australia and New Zealand into the system.⁴ The great southern continent again became the target of interest. Alexander Dalrymple, the first Admiralty hydrographer, thought it could be greater than Asia and home of fifty million people. Cook was enjoined to take possession, but only with the consent of the inhabitants. 'No European Nation has a right to occupy any part of their country, or settle among them without their voluntary consent'.⁵

The great southern continent never eventuated, but in the world wars from 1740 to 1815, the British occupied, for strategic reasons, various French and Dutch colonies. Quebec was acquired in America and the Raj established in India. The Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, and Ceylon were retained to protect the sea route to India. The East Indies (present Indonesia) were returned to the Dutch, but Singapore island was occupied. To fill the place of lost American penal colonies, New South Wales was settled in 1788. A year later, on the first voyage to

³ Darwin, *Empire Project*, pp. xi, 2.

⁴ See C. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 11–15; V. T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire 1763–1783* (London: Longmans Green, 1952), vol. I, pp. 62–70.

⁵ G. Williams, 'The Pacific', in *OHBE*, vol. II, p. 559.

exploit Cook's discoveries, the mutiny on HMS *Bounty* led the perpetrators to found the first Pacific Island colony on Pitcairn in 1790.⁶ In 1838 it became a primitive pioneer democracy where women were given the vote and compulsory education begun. New Zealand was annexed in 1840 because whalers, missionaries, and traders were crossing the Tasman Sea in increasing numbers. By the 1870s the self-governing Australian colonies and New Zealand were so well established that they also began to look overseas and prompted the British government to move into the Pacific Islands.

New Zealand's colonial population numbered about 250,000 by 1870, six times the number of the indigenous Maori. When Britain withdrew its last imperial battalion at a critical moment in the decade-long New Zealand Wars, colonial leaders ganged up in London with like-minded Canadians and Australians to lobby for holding the Empire together.⁷ This movement gave birth to the term 'imperialism', which in subsequent years changed in meaning to cover any expansion of territory, power, investments, and influence. The keynote of the imperialism of this 'Second British Empire' was strategy. India was the core, and China, with its vast potential market, an ever-elusive goal. The strategic by-products were widespread on the fringes of India—to the west in the Arabian/Persian Gulf, Aden, Zanzibar, and East Africa; to the east in Burma, the Straits Settlements, Malaya, Hong Kong, Labuan, and the treaty ports of China, notably Shanghai and, eventually, to a naval base at Wei-hai-Wei in the north.⁸

Passing its peak as the 'workshop of the world' by the mid-nineteenth century, Britain continued, nevertheless, to expand its empire. 'Incremental colonization' was followed by 'explosive colonization' and 'recolonization' to use James Belich's intriguing 'Anglo-world' lexicon.⁹ Imperialism was essentially a defensive, fear-driven policy. The partition of Africa in the 1880s and 1890s left a swathe of territories from the Cape to Cairo under British control. The partition of Southeast Asia brought British sway over Burma, Malaya, and North Borneo. The partition of the Pacific was different. Here was a species of imperialism by which the 'explosive' colonies in Australia and New Zealand inveigled Britain into far-flung dependencies—this was colonial imperialism rather than metro-imperialism.

Expansion into the Pacific Islands was done tardily and reluctantly because the islands were distant, mainly profitless, and did not command any vital sea route. They were only brought within the empire because of expansionist ambitions in the colonies and because of the British government's sense of responsibility for the conduct of British subjects from those colonies. A subsidiary motive was fear that

⁶ J. W. Davidson, 'European Penetration of the South Pacific 1779–1842', PhD thesis, Cambridge, 1942, p. 14.

⁷ C. C. Eldridge, *England's Mission: The Imperial Idea in the Age of Gladstone and Disraeli 1868–1880* (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 104–10, 112–16, 128–31.

⁸ W. D. McIntyre, *The Commonwealth of Nations 1869–1971* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1977), pp. 20–4.

⁹ See J. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010).

rival powers, notably the United States, Germany, or France, might seize useful harbours. A major reason for caution was the awful warning provided by New Zealand. It had been annexed in 1840 only because land speculators and settlers were moving in from New South Wales and a colonizing company was actively recruiting in England. The Colonial Office decided that the government had to step in to prevent trouble between the Maori and the settlers. It failed dismally in this aim and there was a costly decade of warfare in the 1860s.¹⁰ In contrast with New Zealand, when a British naval officer rashly annexed Hawaii in 1843, his action was repudiated.¹¹

Just as the settler frontier had spread from New South Wales to New Zealand, so it spread later to the Fiji Islands. There, as in other regions, Europeans, interacting with traditional polities, upset the local balance of power. In 1858, the chief of the small island of Bau, who aspired to rule all the Fiji Islands, offered to hand over the protection of the country to the British in return for the settlement of certain debts he had incurred for damage done to the property of some Americans. The British government did not reject the offer outright as it had Hawaii. A commissioner was sent to investigate, but he called at Auckland in 1860, just as the wars broke out. One group of hostile Pacific Islanders was clearly enough. The offer of Fiji was turned down in 1863, but this did not deter the settlers.

By the mid-1860s cotton plantations in Fiji experienced a minor boom as a result of cotton shortages induced by the American Civil War. Soon the economic prospects for sugar growing in Fiji also looked promising. Just as the New Zealand gold rushes were petering out, the 'great Fiji rush' of the 1870s began, and the settler population rose to four thousand, twice that in New Zealand at the time of annexation thirty years before. On several occasions the Fiji settlers requested annexation by an Australian colony or New Zealand. Meanwhile, there were demands from the governments of these colonies that Britain should annex Fiji. When armed disputes arose between settlers and the mixed government established in Fiji, British naval officers found themselves intervening to keep the peace. In 1873 the British government decided to send another official to report on Fiji. Prime Minister Gladstone loathed the prospect of annexation, fearing more conflicts like the New Zealand Wars. But his commissioner was so convinced of the need for intervention that he went ahead and negotiated a Deed of Cession on 10 October 1874, and the Disraeli Government, which had come to power earlier in the year, had little option but to take control.¹²

The Fiji Islands were the only group annexed at this stage. The Colonial Office refused to step beyond. The New Zealand government at various times called for the annexation of Samoa, Hawaii, the Cook Islands, and Rotuma (north of Fiji).

¹⁰ See J. Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflicts* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1986).

¹¹ J. I. Brookes, *International Rivalry in the Pacific Islands, 1800–1875* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1941), pp. 131–8.

¹² See W. D. McIntyre, *The Imperial Frontier in the Tropics, 1865–75* (London: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 240–66, 317–36.

Australians were interested first in New Guinea and also the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands. In fact, the major Tasman colonies were responsible for two quite grandiose proposals in the aftermath of the annexation of Fiji. Firstly, the New Zealand government gave support to the Polynesian Company registered in Auckland. It was designed as a chartered company for the Pacific and to work towards 'the establishment of the Polynesian islands as one Dominion with New Zealand as the centre of Government: the Dominion, like Canada, to be a British dependency'. Second, in 1875 the premier of New South Wales suggested that Britain should gain control of the islands of Melanesia and Micronesia. Secretary of State Lord Kimberley thought the Australasian colonies seemed bent on declaring a Monroe Doctrine for the Pacific.¹³

How then should the British government respond to the colonial pressures? Remaining aloof was not an option because of the activities of British subjects—missionaries, traders, settlers, beachcombers—in the islands. In particular, the government could not condone abuses by labour recruiters who frequented the New Hebrides, Solomon Islands, New Guinea, and elsewhere to secure migrant workers for cotton and sugar plantations in Queensland and Fiji. This labour traffic (known as 'blackbirding') gave rise to a major humanitarian outcry in mid-Victorian Britain. Although labour recruiting was being exploited by Melanesian 'big men' as a means of securing advantages, notably firearms, it was denounced by missionaries and their allies in Britain.¹⁴ In the late 1860s the government received eloquent calls for action. Several notorious incidents forced the authorities to impose restrictions. In 1868 Queensland began to control the entry of migrant labour into the colony. Taking men from their home islands without consent was made an offence, and recruiters were required to undertake the repatriation of migrant workers. But the regulations only applied in Queensland. To regulate labour ships at sea, Parliament passed the Pacific Islanders Protection Act in 1872 and removal of labourers without consent became a felony. Procedures were laid down for the prosecution of offenders in colonial courts. Fiji was one of the areas that remained unregulated and this provided another reason to annex. But as he faced the colonial and humanitarian agitations for widespread action in the islands, Secretary of State Lord Carnarvon suggested that the problem could be met by 'another means'. He adopted a proposal that the governor of the new colony of Fiji should exercise jurisdiction over British subjects in other islands. Thus the Western Pacific High Commission, authorized by Parliament in 1875 and put into operation two years later, involved the governor of Fiji's appointment as high commissioner reporting to the Foreign Office in this role. Under this jurisdiction consuls in New Caledonia, Samoa, and Tonga became deputy commissioners with authority to try British offenders. Ironically, however, this

¹³ McIntyre, *The Imperial Frontier in the Tropics, 1865–75*, pp. 337–56.

¹⁴ See O. Parnaby, *Britain and the Labor Trade in the Southwest Pacific* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1964).

judicial device, designed to *avoid* further annexations, eventually became the umbrella for very widespread expansion.¹⁵

Territorial acquisitions resumed in the 1880s in response to continuing pressures from Australia and New Zealand, the inadequacy of the new High Commission to deal with disputes between British subjects and Pacific Islanders, and international competition. The colonies were also interested in the New Hebrides. For Queensland they were an important source of labour and the possibility of foreign control would pose a threat to Australia. New Zealanders were concerned about missions established by the Presbyterian Church. The French, however, treated the New Hebrides as an adjunct to New Caledonia, some 350 miles to the southwest, annexed in 1853. To the metropolitan powers the New Hebrides proved an endless nuisance. In 1878 the British and French governments agreed to guarantee its neutrality, although the British would probably have preferred to let the French have them but for the protests that could be expected from New Zealand and Australia. In 1888 a Franco-British naval commission began to visit the islands periodically to investigate cases of dispute and exact retribution if property was damaged. By the early years of the twentieth century there were 366 European residents in the New Hebrides, and from 1899 the naval commission appointed resident deputy commissioners. Finally, in 1906 a British-French condominium was created.

Pressure for intervention in New Guinea came from Australia. There had been several proposals since the 1860s and in 1883 the Queensland government acted unilaterally and annexed Papua, in the southeast quarter of the island. This action was immediately repudiated by the British government, but shortly afterwards the German flag was raised in northeastern New Guinea, New Britain, and New Ireland. This caused the British government to relent, declare a Protectorate, and re-annex Papua hurriedly and then agree to discuss with Germany a partition of the whole region. British and German spheres of influence in the Pacific were defined by treaties in 1886 and 1899. Germany's included its New Guinea annexations and also Bougainville, Buka and Nissan of the northern Solomon Islands, as well as the Marshall, Caroline, and Mariana Islands to the north. The British sphere encompassed the rest of the Solomon Islands, Papua, the Gilbert Islands, and the Ellice Islands. In this way Australia's interest in Torres Strait helped to draw Britain into the central Pacific. British New Guinea was handed over to Australia in 1906.

New Zealand's growing interests focused on Polynesia, especially Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, and Niue. The British for their part (apart from the London Missionary Society) were not particularly interested in Samoa, but they were concerned about German activities in Tonga, which was closer to Fiji and possessed an excellent harbour. At first, Britain was content to appoint the consul in Samoa as a deputy commissioner and to participate in a joint British/German/American scheme of municipal government in Apia in 1879. But in 1899 an international bargain was struck: Germany acquired full control of Western Samoa;

¹⁵ See D. Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission 1877-1914* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1967).