The Imperial School of American Colonial Historians

Max Savelle

The "imperial school of American colonial historians" may be defined as that group of historians dealing with the British colonies in the American hemisphere prior to 1783 whose fundamental approach to their subject is based upon the assumption that, since those colonies were integral parts of the British Empire, their history should be studied as the history of parts of the Empire. This point of approach contrasts sharply with that of the "nationalist" school of historians of the United States, of which the most notable examples are perhaps George Bancroft and John Fiske, and of which the most notable recent exponent is Edward Channing—a school of historians who investigate the colonial period chiefly, if not exclusively, with the objective of finding there the origins of the United States—of which, of course, the British-Americans of the colonial period never even dreamed! Thus, where the nationalist sees national origins, the imperial historian sees the development of institutions within the framework and organic interrelationships of that conglomerate aggregation of widely differing economic, social, and political entities known as the "old British empire." The nationalist historian sees the history of thirteen of these many differing entities as something unique, for in it he finds the origins and the foundations of a great nation; to the imperial historian, when he pushes his position to its logical conclusion, the so-called "thirteen" are merely some of the parts of a much larger phenomenon, the British Empire as a whole, which was itself only one of the major incidents in the expansion of European civilization round the world.

The first move among modern historians to write of the colonies from the point of view of the old Empire rather than from that of the new American nation came, naturally enough, in England itself. For there, men like George O.

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Trevelyan began to write of the colonies as communities of Englishmen, and of the American Revolution as a civil, rather than as an international war; and John A. Doyle, Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, saw in the appearance of English communities in America chiefly, though not purely, the transition of culture from England to America. As he himself says in the introduction to his first volume, "I have preferred to regard the history of the United States as the transplantation of English ideas and institutions to a distant soil, and the adaptation of them to new wants and altered modes of life . . . . The history of the American colonies is in one sense nothing more than a continuation of English history . . . . The colonies did indeed one and all form for themselves institutions closely resembling those of the mother country. But these institutions were developed, not transplanted or servilely copied."

It will be noted, here, that although Doyle sees the history of the United States as "the transplantation of English ideas and institutions," he anticipates, in the last sentence, the frontier theory of local variations just then being developed by Frederick Jackson Turner.

The study of the British overseas colonies of the old Empire has gone on apace in England since Trevelyan and Doyle, and the list of distinguished English colonial historians includes such names as those of Sir John Seeley and James A. Williamson, and, more recently, those of A. P. Newton and Richard Pares. One of the most distinguished products of this school is the recent first volume of the Cambridge History of the British Empire—a volume, indeed, that is apparently far too little known in this country.

It was easy and natural for Englishmen to write of the colonies as phenomena in the overseas expansion of Britain. It was not so easy for Americans, living in the shadow of George Bancroft and John Fiske, to throw off their nationalistic provincialism and bias and write of the colonies in the moods of the Englishmen and the British-Americans of the pre-Revolutionary era. Those American historians who managed it have introduced a new mood and a new perspective into American historiography.

The most notable American exponents of the imperial school of colonial historians are Herbert Levi Osgood, George Louis Beer, Charles McLean Andrews, and Lawrence Henry Gipson.

Osgood was the first important American historian of the colonial period to react against the narrow nationalistic bias of George Bancroft. A pupil of John W. Burgess, who was one of the major stars in the galaxy of German-trained, so-called "scientific" historians, Osgood was convinced that the colonial phase of American history should be studied as "a natural outgrowth of the history of Europe." Thus the task he set himself when he began his monumental study of the thirteen colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a twofold one. His own description of his effort is given in the preface to *The American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* as follows: "The entire work, while serving as an introduction to American institutional history, will at the same time, it is hoped, illustrate the principles of British colonization, so far as those were revealed in the early relations between the home government and its colonies on the North American continent."

Thus on the one side, the origin and development of American institutions; on the other, the origin and development of British policy and the institutions of colonial administration and control; policy and institutions an understanding of which is so essential to any real understanding of the colonies and their history—or even of the history of the later United States, for that matter. But Osgood concerned himself only with the colonies on the continent of North America. His major interest was centered, after all, upon the origins of the institutions of the later United States. Thus while his perspective was a much broader one than that of his nationalistic predecessors, he assumed that it was unnecessary for him to concern himself with any of the British colonies other than the thirteen that eventually seceded from the Empire. Osgood is thus both an historian of the colonies and an historian of the United States. As Charles M. Andrews wrote of Osgood's history, it was "not British history, nor yet American history in any narrow and

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exclusive sense of that term, but something between, more American than British and growing more and more American with every decade that passes."

The important thing about Osgood is that he realized, more than any other American historian of his generation, perhaps, the fact that the history of the British colonies in America in the eighteenth century could not be written without great error and distortion, even from the nationalistic point of view, without considering thoroughly and carefully what he called "the British side of the problem."

The realization of the second of Osgood's objectives, however, the examination of what he called "the British side of the problem," was not actually achieved by Osgood, but by one of his pupils, George Louis Beer. Beer, indeed, disclaimed any direct intention of writing any part of the history of the United States. As he put it, in the preface to his volume on *British Colonial Policy, 1754-1765*, this "is a study of British policy during the critical period of the old Empire. Thus the essay belongs distinctly to the domain of British history; but to the extent that English and American development were then inseparable, it also, but more indirectly, falls within the field occupied by American history. The focus of interest is, however, the British Empire, and not the rise of the American Nation."

To Beer, then, his task was logically to investigate one aspect of the history of the British Empire. Any elucidation of the history of the United States that might result was for him purely coincidental. But he adhered conscientiously to the historical logic of his position, and his achievement is significant not merely because he made a major contribution to historical knowledge, but also because he succeeded in completely freeing himself from the bias of nationalism.

Charles M. Andrews, long the dean of the imperial school of American colonial historians and founder of a veritable school of distinguished students of the history of the colonial period among his own pupils, carried the logic of the "imperial" position forward to include all the British colonies in the American hemisphere. The title of his great-

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est work, *The Colonial Period of American History*, indicates that he, too, like Osgood, is still interested in United States origins; he simply feels that those origins can be seen and understood only in terms of all the British colonies in America, and of their relations with each other and with the mother country.

Thus, in the preface of his *magnum opus* he says: “I have had no intention of adding another account to the existing histories of the thirteen original colonies. I have been convinced for many years that to place the colonies in their rightful historical setting and so to discover what our colonial history is all about, it would be necessary to reëxamine the evidence from a vantage point other than that usually taken, to view them not from within, as is commonly done, but from without, with the movement constantly forward, following the natural course of historical development, and disregarding all preconceptions based on later events. For this purpose I have approached the subject from the English end, from the land whence the colonists came and of which they were always legally a part, and have broadened the scope of my inquiry to include all England’s colonial possessions in the West that were founded in the seventeenth century. I have done this because I believe that final conclusions must always rest upon the experiences England had with all, not a part, of her colonies. That some of these colonies remained British while others became American does not, historically speaking, enter in as a determining factor.”

It is to be observed, of course, that Andrews’ interest is still in the early period of “our history”—a phrase that he uses repeatedly. He is apparently at heart still a nationalist, just as Osgood was; his originality lay in his method of determining just what the truth in this early period of “our history” was. That is to say, he was convinced that any history of the “thirteen original colonies” that omitted a discussion of the British West Indies, on the one hand, or of the institutional development of the mother country relative to the colonies, on the other, could only result in a distortion of the truth. Thus to understand “our history,” one must see

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this early part of it as an organic part of the British American Empire.

But Andrews succeeded in doing what neither Beer nor Osgood had succeeded in doing. For he was able to describe both the internal institutional developments of the colonies and the British institutions of colonial administration, together with the relationships between them, all together in his one great work.

But it is Lawrence H. Gipson who has carried the position of the Imperial School to its logical conclusion. For Gipson's work is concerned with the British Empire between 1750 and 1776 as such; and, except for the warm blast against Tom Paine, George Bancroft, and the historical distortions perpetrated by the nationalist school that appears in the beginning of volume six, Gipson writes his history much as a man of 1760 might have written it, as though the United States had never existed. He has succeeded, about as nearly as anyone might be expected to do, in divesting himself of the American habit of seeing the colonial period through the distorting haze of the history of the United States—even, indeed, of the "our history" mood of Andrews.

The title of Gipson's work indicates his position: The British Empire before the American Revolution. His history, as it is projected, must, of course, include the history of the change in attitude on the part of the Americans of the thirteen colonies that led them, in the thirty-odd years before 1776, to change from contented British subjects into a body of Americans fired with a hatred of England and determined upon independence. But Gipson's work is, nevertheless, primarily a history of the old Empire in that period. And, since it is that, it is not limited to the colonies in the American hemisphere, but includes all the colonies of the Empire, including those of Africa and India; further, as it is a history of the Empire as a whole and not just the colonies, it must needs discuss all the other parts of the Empire as well, including Britain itself. Gipson begins about 1750; for, as he says, "to get a view of the old Empire in a state of tranquility and equilibrium for the last time in its history one must indeed turn to the brief period between the end of the War of the Austrian Succession and the outbreak of hos-
ilities between the English and French in North America that led to the great Seven Years’ War.”

Thus Gipson is primarily and exclusively an historian of the old British Empire. The problem he sets himself is much broader than that of either Osgood, Beer, or Andrews; his approach to history is much broader, also; for where they are historians of institutions, Gipson is an historian of civilization, covering social phenomena, military and economic history, and other aspects of life as well as political events and institutions. He is concerned little, if at all, with the history of the United States, although he does give a little greater emphasis to the American British colonies than he does to the British colonies elsewhere in the world, and although in any discussion of imperial history in the years between 1750 and 1775 the reasons for the American Revolution and the formation of the United States must inevitably appear.

These, then, are the chief American exponents of the imperial school of colonial historians. Osgood, Beer, and Andrews appear to belong, in the last analysis, to the so-called German school of “scientific” history. Their works are all primarily institutional histories; and all three of these writers, particularly Beer and Andrews, base their conclusions largely upon original source materials of an “official” documentary sort. As Andrews says, “The historian, if he is to keep both his levels and his proportions true, cannot fail to stress, first of all, the institutional and structural aspects of colonial life, which, despite certain present-day opinions to the contrary, are fundamental to any right understanding of the colonial past.” Gipson, on the other hand, is more of a social historian. As he says, his work “makes no attempt to institutionalize the old British Empire but is concerned rather with an analysis of some of those forces—economic, social, and political—motivating various geographical groups within it before the American Revolution.”


*Gipson, *The British Empire Before the American Revolution*, I, ix.*
but he uses more contemporary imprints and personal papers than the others.

All of these historians are conscious of, and affected by, the influence of economic concerns upon human history. As Andrews says, however, “if he [the historian] is honest to himself and his evidence he cannot neglect the imponderable forces (always most difficult to identify and trace), as well as the driving influence of emotional and mass psychology. These factors are essential, however much those who can see in society, present and past, only things that are ‘real’ and ‘practical’ . . . and consider irrelevant whatever cannot be pinned down as a social or economic activity. No one should deal with the past whose ambition it is to find a single cause for all that has happened or who is unwilling to admit the existence of many causes acting simultaneously.”

He quotes J. M. Keynes to the effect that “The view that the economic ideal is the sole respectable purpose of the community as a whole is the most dreadful heresy which has ever gained the ear of a civilized people.” And Andrews himself continues, “Modern industrialism would seem to be responsible for these latter-day attempts to interpret the past in the light of the present and to apply the Marxian doctrine that social progress is the outcome of class conflict and of nothing else.”

It is of considerable interest to notice that, with the exception of Beer, the historians of this group share some of the basic positions of the so-called “frontier school” of American historians symbolized by Frederick Jackson Turner. For Osgood, Andrews, and Gipson all appear to accept, in one degree or another, the proposition that the culture inherited from the mother country underwent so profound a modification or differentiation in the course of replanting and new growth in the new environment as to make the product of this adaptation an essentially new variant of the broad culture pattern of western civilization. Andrews describes the colonies in the eighteenth century as having “marked individual and sectional differences that made cooperation difficult and union practically impossible, each moving forward in its own sphere toward a popular and local manage-

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
ment of its own affairs, through the growth to prominence and leadership of its representative assembly. These colonies . . . were putting into practice certain ideas regarding government, law, land tenure, and finance that were not in accord with English precedent and usage. In these conflicts and divergences of the eighteenth century are to be found the beginnings of American history properly so called . . . .”

And in another place Andrews says “The story of how this was done—how that which was English slowly and imperceptibly merged into that which was American—has never been adequately told; but it is a fascinating phase of history, more interesting and enlightening when studied against the English background than when construed as an American problem only. It is the story of the gradual elimination of those elements, feudal and proprietary, that were foreign to the normal life of a frontier land, and of the gradual adjustment of the colonies to the restraints and restrictions that were imposed upon them by the commercial policy of the mother country. It is the story also of the growth of the colonial assemblies . . . . It is above all . . . the story of the gradual transformation of these assemblies from the provincial councils that the home government intended them to be into miniature parliaments. At the end of a long struggle . . . they emerged powerful legislative bodies, as self-conscious in their way as the House of Commons in England was becoming during the same eventful years.” On the other hand, in seeing the emergence of truly American institutions, differentiated from those of England or of Europe under the influence of the local American geographic and ethnic environment as manifestations of the Turnerian process in the formation of cultures, these historians in effect relate the Turner thesis to the larger process of European expansion. The result seems to be that the American frontier becomes the frontier of western civilization, to be sure, but one in which both the processes of continuity and the processes of new cultural growth are going on together to produce, around the periphery of the so-called Atlantic community,

12 Ibid., I, xiii.
cultures which are, to say the very least, new and in many cases sharply different cultural variants of western civilization. Further, as the history of the "old British empire" is a part of the expansion of Europe in general, these historians, particularly Beer, Osgood, and Gipson, along with Francis Parkman, relate the development of the British colonies, in one way or another, to the parallel developments of their non-British neighbors; although it is Herbert E. Bolton and his students who have made the most conscious and deliberate efforts to relate the Anglo-Saxon colonial expansion in this hemisphere to that of the other colonizing European nations.

The broadened perspective of the imperial school of colonial historians, and their effort to see the British-American colonial phenomenon in terms of its organic relationship with Britain and the rest of the Empire seems to be a refutation, for this particular group, at least, of Professor C. J. H. Hayes' charge at Washington that "a striking general fact about it [our historical writing] during the past seventy years has been the tendency to turn away from European themes and to concentrate upon strictly American." This generalization is probably in a general sense true. And it is also doubtless true, as Professor Hayes says, that the vogue of the restricted interpretation of the American frontier that sees it as "a peculiarly American phenomenon, determining the unique character of our national society and culture," and "the concurrent neglect of broader and otherwise obvious considerations, have been . . . at once a result and a stimulant of growing intellectual isolationism in the United States." But the members of the imperial school have been acutely conscious of the provincialism of historians of the United States in their approach to the colonial period, and they deliberately set out to combat it. To quote Andrews again, "American writers, except in an incidental way, have ignored the English side of the story, because it was English and therefore out of their range if not beyond their ken . . . . The time must come, however, when this duality of interest will be regarded as a neces-

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15 Ibid., 201.
sary part of the stock in trade of every serious writer on the subject who deals with it in a fair-minded and comprehensive way, and not until that time has come will this long and eventful period of our country's past receive its merited treatment as history unalloyed and find proper recognition not merely as a phase preliminary to our own career as a nation, but also as an integral part of the English and Continental history in an era of colonization and commercial and maritime aggrandizement."

Gipson is even more deliberate in his effort to correct the errors of provincial American nationalism. As he puts it in the preface to Volume VI of his monumental description of the British Empire before the American Revolution, "In the present work one of the motives that dictated the selection of topics and space allotted to each of these has been a desire to emphasize certain important aspects of the history of this conflict [The Seven Years' War] that have been, it would seem, especially subject to popular misconceptions and even to serious misinterpretations on the part of many historians and of others who are not.”

And among the chief of these misconceptions, fathered by Tom Paine and propagated by George Bancroft, was the idea “that the connection of Americans with monarchical Great Britain, far from being a blessing, had actually been a curse..."

The imperial school of colonial historians, then, may be said to be distinguished by its deliberate effort to relate what was going on in British America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to what was going on in Europe at the same time, thereby placing the history of this continent in a more correct perspective relative to the development of western civilization as a whole. While they do seem to accept, if with some caution, the Turner hypothesis of the formation of new cultures, they relate that hypothesis to the great phenomenon, the expansion of Europe. In doing so it would appear that they, perhaps more than any other group of historians interested primarily in American history, have escaped the limitations of nationalistic bias or myopia. It might even be suggested that an attitude toward American

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18 Ibid., 5.
history, or any part of it, that sees that history in terms of its world perspective is highly desirable in a generation of historians as acutely conscious as ours is that our very survival as a nation seems to depend upon an understanding of the origins and nature of our external relations.