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Empire, Imperialism and the Partition of Africa

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Peter Cain and Tony Hopkins wrote:

From the perspective of...[our study of British Imperialism], there is an argument to be made for reducing the attention customarily paid to the partition of Africa because the importance of the continent, as measured by trade and financial flows, did not give it a high ranking among Britain's international trading partners or even among regions that felt the force of her imperialist ambitions.... However, given that partition...is so firmly entrenched in the literature as the classic case of late nineteenth century imperialism, there are compelling historiographical reasons why we have situated our own interpretation in the context of the existing literature.¹

Profoundly dissatisfied with explanations for Africa's partition which have emphasized variously the significance of strategic concerns; the crucial role played by proto-nationalism; or the problems besetting Britain as 'an ageing, defensive power struggling to fend off new challenges to her interests', Cain and Hopkins instead argued that:

the impulses motivating [British] policy can be traced to the metropole, and particularly to the expansion after 1850 of...gentlemanly occupations and values...Indeed Britain's actions in partitioning Africa followed the contours of this development: the main weight of her interests lay in Egypt and southern Africa, where City and service interests were most prominently represented, and it was there that Britain showed the greatest vigour in promoting her claims.²

More precisely, Britain's occupation of Egypt was 'closely linked to restoring the health of public finance'...; while the occupation of southern Africa was 'also a result of Britain's growing stake in the region, where her investments had risen substantially following the discovery of minerals'. In the latter case, though, Cain and Hopkins were at pains to acknowledge that:

the Anglo-Boer War was not fought at the behest of the mineowners any more than it was fought to secure a naval base or to realise the dreams of an ambitious pro-consol. The decision was made because Britain was an expanding power which sought to create in Africa a dynamic economic and political satellite of the kind already in evidence in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and, it should be added, Argentina. Kruger's plans for achieving greater political independence cut across the trajectory of British policy by threatening to confine Britain's influence to the Cape and by perpetuating uncertainties about the long-term future of the mining industry.³

So far as tropical Africa was concerned:

in the absence of a powerful City interest, the Foreign Office had to rely on chartered companies, which in turn required subsidies...in exchange for political services. Organisations such as the Royal Niger Company and the Imperial British East Africa Company represented gentlemanly capitalist interests in a dilute form...In West Africa, mercantile pressure groups also joined with British Chambers of Commerce representing manufacturers who were keen to preserve markets for their goods. But this example is an exception that proves the rule: policy in Britain's principal spheres of interest...was not made by the manufacturing lobby and was influenced by it only to a limited extent. Even in West Africa, manufacturing interests made headway only because their demands were consistent with free trade....

Far from British policy, then, or rather policies, as there 'could be no "one Africa" policy...since the continent was not united',⁴ being 'essentially restrained and reactive',⁵ the rapid expansion of the financial and service sector of the economy in London and the south-east meant that Britain in Africa was an 'advancing not a retreating power'.⁶

Seven years have passed since the argument summarized above first appeared in fully worked out form,⁷ certainly time enough for an assessment to be made of the extent to which gentlemanly capitalism does

actually provide 'a systematic account of a momentous historical event'.⁸ In what follows, this chapter will examine the part played by Britain in the Scramble for Africa in the light of subsequent publications and recent research. Amongst the former are essay reviews of *British Imperialism* itself; general overviews of Africa's partition or of British overseas expansion; and specialist monographs and reviews devoted to particular aspects of British involvement in Africa during the nineteenth century.⁹ The latter comprises as yet unpublished research on the City of London and the coming of war in South Africa between 1895 and 1899. Not surprisingly, the verdict is mixed; less predictably it may point to a contradiction of sorts at the core of imperialism.

I

Of all the examples of 'gentlemanly capitalist' interests shaping British intervention in Africa, the case of Egypt seems to be the strongest. According to Robinson and Gallagher, Britain occupied Egypt in 1882 because the breakdown of law and order following the overthrow of the compliant regime of the Khedive by proto-nationalists threatened Britain's strategic interest in the Suez Canal, the crucial importance of which was to safeguard the route to India.¹⁰ Cain and Hopkins will have none of this. They argue instead that British policymakers were driven to defend Britain's substantial economic interests. These comprised some 80 per cent of Egypt's exports and 44 per cent of her imports by 1880. More importantly, they also constituted significant holdings of Egyptian Government stock by City investors who believed that they carried an implied guarantee by Britain. It was these investments which the British thought were threatened by the nationalist deputies of the Chamber of Notables. When Lord Granville, the Foreign Secretary, was advised in March 1882 that the Chamber would not give up their claim to manage parts of the Budget, he came to the reluctant but unavoidable conclusion that 'it must end by their being put down by force'.¹¹

This is not a version of events which has been much disputed in recent years. Apart from Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot's non-committal listing of the possible causes of British intervention, the reference for which is Hopkins's own article on the subject,¹² the only serious challenge came from Andrew Porter a decade ago. He attacked the argument put forward by Hopkins in 1986¹³ for failing 'to embrace...[the] very broad range of British interests which is still missing in...accounts of Egypt's occupation, and which the gentlemanly capitalist framework fails to provide'.¹⁴ Neither of these charges was explicitly addressed in

British Imperialism, and it appears to be a disagreement which turns primarily on very different readings of Bruce Johns's work on British business interests in Egypt.¹⁵ What is significant for Porter is the picture of 'an indecisive and ill-informed Government' whose 'hesitant adjustments of policy to a changing economic relationship' caused 'the convergence of imperial and private interests',¹⁶ while for Cain and Hopkins the importance of Johns's research is the proof that 'the City's involvement reached to the highest levels'. Lord Rothschild himself actively 'represented the interests of British investors...[as did] the Corporation of Foreign Bondholders, which mobilized *The Times*, the financial press, and the considerable number of members of parliament (besides Gladstone) who had a financial stake in the Egyptian economy'.¹⁷ It is this latter interpretation which receives most support in Colin Newbury's chapter in Volume III of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* on the Partition of Africa. Britain's demarcation of Egypt in 1882 as a British sphere by unilateral naval and military action, writes Newbury, 'had its origins in both the internationalisation of the khedive's insolvency and the methods pursued by foreign agencies to cure that condition'.¹⁸ Starting from Lord Salisbury's acknowledgement that Britain's stake in Egypt was largely commercial, this interest grew to the point where:

in a wave of Gladstonian justification and City satisfaction, Parliament ultimately approved the official underwriting of a 'special interest' in trade through the Canal, investment of 'capital and industry', and protection of British nationals.

It was 'these motives for the defeat of [the nationalist] Urabi's forces at Tel-el-Kebir in September [1882] which left Britain the task of patching up "the great disintegration"'.¹⁹

II

Further south, however, the role played by 'gentlemanly capitalism' appears to have been very much weaker. Indeed, if there is one region where Cain and Hopkins stretch the utility of the concept of 'gentlemanly capitalism' to breaking point, it is tropical Africa. This is the case not least because their earlier studies, separately²⁰ and together,²¹ seem to offer a more satisfactory account of the diffuse influences shaping British (and other European) interventions in West Africa, one which ascribed a much less pushful role to the financial interests of the City.

Indeed, it was by placing Cain and Hopkins's earlier works in an international context that the present writer attempted in 1995 to explain the process and pattern of Africa's partition.²² It took as its starting point Eric Hobsbawm's observation that:

the major fact about the nineteenth century is the creation of a single global economy, progressively reaching into the most remote corners of the world, an increasingly dense web of economic transactions, communications, and movements of goods, money and people linking the developed countries with each other and with the undeveloped world.²³

Of particular importance was the further fact that the pace and nature of change accelerated in the last 30–40 years of the century. This period, according to Barraclough, transformed itself to such an extent that 'the age of coal and iron was succeeded after 1870 by the age of steel and electricity, of oil and chemicals'.²⁴ Industrial capital's accelerated development, sometimes called the 'Second Industrial Revolution', more precisely identified as the transitional phase between competitive and monopoly capitalism, was quintessentially an uneven process. It profoundly upset existing economic and social balances both between countries and within them. Generally speaking, the new industries were most in evidence in Germany and the United States. By 1900, these two countries had carved out an increasing share of the world's trade for themselves largely at Britain's expense.

Britain's relative industrial decline after 1870 was influenced not only by increased competition from other countries, however, but also by the fact that her own protracted process of industrialization had been extremely uneven, subordinated in the latter part of the nineteenth century to the City of London's commercial and financial interests. Consequently, from the 1870s onwards, as Cain and Hopkins famously stressed, 'while Britain's dominance of international finance increased, her industrial sector began to decline relative to her major competitors. Free trade and invisible exports, the twin supports of financial supremacy, played their part in emphasizing and underwriting the decline of industry.'²⁵

This industrial decline was all the more serious because it occurred in the context of what contemporaries called the 'Great Depression' of 1873 to 1890. Once again, the effects of the Depression were not uniformly felt, but while there were periods of recovery, the general tendency of prices was downwards. In this deflationary situation,

increased competition for markets sent a wave of protectionism sweeping across Europe and North America between 1875 and 1892. Only Britain remained committed to free trade. It did so not because of any sentimental attachment to past practice when Britain had been the 'workshop of the world', but because the operations of the City depended on the unfettered movement of capital and commodities. As a result, British industry, already disadvantaged, according to some scholars, by a basic distortion in British capital markets, was denied protection on its home ground. British imports of manufactured goods increased from 3 per cent of total imports in 1850 to 25 per cent in 1900. Nor were British manufacturers best placed to compete in the markets of advanced industrial countries. Excluded by the often better quality of German and American products, as well as by tariff barriers, British exports to Europe and the United States fell by 19 per cent in value between 1874 and 1900. For all these reasons, 'industrial interests in Britain shifted, around 1880, into decisive support for the acquisition of new markets in Asia and Africa'.²⁶

But neither the shifting balance of economic and political power in the northern hemisphere nor intensified competition for markets during the Depression determined that Africa would be partitioned. Processes and events in Africa itself were important, influenced as they were by external forces. After 1870, the price of vegetable oils, West Africa's main export crop, fell dramatically. It did so not only because the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 provided Southern Asian producers with easier access to European markets, but also because of expanding world production of mineral oils. The ensuing trade depression quickly made itself felt along the West African coast and hinterland. Local rivalries intensified as disputes raged over 'the allocation of shares in the export trade, over the prices to be asked and given, and over the distribution of reduced profits'. These rivalries in turn were accentuated by European merchants, as they were drawn into African politics, particularly in their role as creditors. And increasingly all of these tensions and struggles adversely affected the flow of trade.²⁷

In these circumstances, some European traders began calling upon their respective governments to restore 'law and order'. The smooth operation of trade, they argued, depended on political stability. They were joined by others whose falling profit margins made them want to restructure the market so as to eliminate African middlemen. The introduction in the 1850s of regular steamship lines between Europe and West Africa had already added to the problems facing established merchants by lowering freight rates and making it easier for newcomers to

enter the trade, and when competition intensified during the Depression, the interruptions to the regular flow of trade caused by the dissolution of the indigenous West African economy and society, were the last straw. European merchants began demanding

political action up to and including colonial annexation, as a means of checking or suppressing commercial competition and, by reducing the political independence of African middlemen, forcing them to accept lower prices.²⁸

The 'character, intensity and influence of mercantile pressures' for metropolitan intervention not only varied from locality to locality in West Africa itself,²⁹ but also met with very different responses from the governments of France, Britain and Germany. Of all the major powers trading in West Africa, France was least able to absorb the new competitive strains. Because the convergence of merchant demands with the broader impact of the Depression was particularly marked in France, her merchant lobby received a sympathetic hearing from successive administrations. With key sectors of French civil society increasingly willing to countenance military campaigns, and with Europe and North America's technological lead over the rest of the world widening almost daily, wars of colonial conquest promised to be cheap and easy. 'By 1870 the local [West African] deterrents to penetration were no longer serious', Flint has noted.³⁰

Starting from their existing Senegalese enclave in 1879, the French began to advance across western Sudan. In its latter stages, the French scramble for African territory, even if accelerated by Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882, and justified, like its British and German counterparts in terms of Social Darwinism, was primarily sustained by 'renewed industrial depression and heightened tariff barriers [which] generated a French will to claim any domain which could be brought within the tariff system of the French Empire'.³¹ The colony's governor commented:

At a time when France is trying to increase her volume of business with Senegal, to develop the resources of her colony and to create new outlets in the very centre of Africa, it does not seem to me possible that all this effort should be made for the profit of a foreign industry.... In such a country the theory of free trade cannot be put into practice.³²

By contrast to French policy, Britain's initial response to the clamour of her own merchants for intervention in West Africa was cautious and

conservative. Although Britain's trading interests were by far the largest of any European state involved in West Africa, merchant cries for help were largely ignored. However, once France began swallowing large chunks of West Africa, this raised the spectre of British trade being excluded by high tariff barriers from a widening zone of French territory. Only then did British policy begin to change direction.

This slow and reluctant change of policy reflected the limited importance of industrial capital in contemporary British political economy. Its interests were often important enough to cause London to react to external changes but it was rarely sufficiently powerful to initiate action. Government policy, crucially influenced by the financial and service interests of the City of London, remained committed to free trade. In this context, and recognizing that there was no realistic possibility of free trade being jettisoned in favour of Protection, industrial interests in Britain added their voice to merchant demands for state intervention. Businessmen, according to Cain, 'began to take an interest in anticipatory annexation of overseas markets. The main fear was that large areas of the world might otherwise be occupied by rival powers with protectionist inclinations.'³³ 'Protectorates are unwelcome burdens', wrote one senior member of the Foreign Office, 'but in this case it is... a question between British protectorates, which would be unwelcome and French protectorates, which would be fatal. Protectorates of one sort or another, are the inevitable outcome of the situation.'³⁴

Britain's pronounced reluctance during the 1880s to do anything more than was strictly necessary to safeguard her existing commercial interests was exemplified further south in West-Central and in East Africa. In neither region were significant British interests involved. Their export trade, however, was more diversified, including cloves from Zanzibar and ivory and wild rubber from the coastal hinterlands. Here the key is that although the price of vegetable oils collapsed after 1870, the price of cloves remained stable and the prices of rubber and ivory actually increased. They ran counter to the general trend of the Depression. This, as Munro noted, had the effect of attracting newcomers to these regions, 'who saw in their relative commercial vitality... a potential for the creation of commercial empires'.³⁵ Chief amongst the interlopers attracted to West-Central Africa was Leopold II of Belgium. Obsessed with the idea of controlling what he hoped would be the riches of the Congo Basin, Leopold actively promoted European exploration of Central Africa during the second half of the 1870s. In East Africa, Leopold's British counterpart was William Mackinnon, a shipowner whose vessels plied between Aden and Zanzibar. Mackinnon

had earlier wanted to lease the Sultan of Zanzibar's mainland territories in order to develop the interior's trade, but this particular scheme was blocked in 1877 when the British Government opted for the continued exercise of indirect influence through the local potentate. The ensuing uneasy equilibrium was disturbed at the start of the 1880s when Leopold's efforts to make commercial treaties with local rulers ran up against the activities of the French explorer, Savorgan de Brazza. When France ratified de Brazza's treaties in 1882, this set off alarm bells in Whitehall and the Wilhelmstrasse. Both Britain and Germany were worried that the protectionist French were about to carve out another huge colony, this time in Central Africa. But because neither country had vital economic interests at stake, they were reluctant to make pre-emptive annexations of their own. For broadly similar reasons, they would have preferred the vast area which later became the Congo Free State left open to everyone's trade. '[The]...main interest of Britain was that the Congo should be free to the peaceful enterprise of all the world,' so Hyam and Martin claim. 'Basically, Britain had enough to do and wished the Congo to lie fallow.'³⁶

While key aspects of the argument made above, notably the consequences of the City's attachment to Free Trade, can be found in Hopkins's *Economic History of West Africa* and in Cain's *Economic Foundations of British Overseas Expansion*, they sit uneasily with Cain and Hopkins's subsequent insistence in *British Imperialism* on the proactive part played even here by gentlemanly capitalism. Attempts to bring Goldie and Mackinnon within the gentlemanly fold by hailing them as 'gentlemen in the making...[because they were] on the make',³⁷ are a little strained, to say the least. As Geoffrey Ingham has complained, it presents 'obvious problems of historical interpretation...[to] subsume this aspect of British expansion under the "gentlemanly" rubric'.³⁸ That British policy in tropical Africa was more restrained and reactive than Cain and Hopkins now allow is also suggested by Newbury's conclusion that it was French expansionism and protectionism after 1879 which called into question established British policy in West Africa.³⁹ Obligated to rethink her position as the French military advance moved eastwards from Upper Senegal, Britain's room for manoeuvre was further circumscribed during the Berlin Congo Conference of 1884/5. Although her rights along the Niger were recognized, Britain failed to get her own way over the Congo. Forced by Germany to abandon her support for Portuguese claims to West-Central Africa, Britain reluctantly recognized the sovereign existence of Leopold's personal fiefdom once the Congo Free Trade Area was guaranteed.

In East Africa, where no such guarantees obtained in the aftermath of Germany's unexpected seizure of Tanganyika, Britain's hand was again forced by foreign competition. Granted a royal charter for his Imperial British East Africa Company in 1888, Mackinnon was belatedly unleashed. But whether Britain's occupation of Kenya and Uganda can be ascribed to the imperatives of gentlemanly capitalism however 'diluted' is another matter. While commercial rather than strategic considerations were certainly uppermost in British thinking, John Darwin has suggested that interest turned into intervention only because the local bridgehead – 'the hinge or "interface" between the metropole and a local periphery' – was 'sufficiently strong and its domestic lobby forceful enough to outweigh the diplomatic and military hazards of a forward policy'. In East Africa, 'as so often elsewhere, Salisbury found himself struggling to regulate the effects of private expansionism, to parry its domestic lobbying and to balance the weight of British interests on the spot against the wider diplomatic pressures to which London was exposed'.⁴⁰ By arguing that 'even when only half exerting herself, Britain was still able to outdistance her new foreign competitors',⁴¹ Cain and Hopkins may have underestimated the range of pressures brought to bear on Whitehall even as they attribute more constancy and purpose to German colonial policy than there actually was.

III

The sheer scale of Britain's financial and commercial involvement in southern Africa generally, and in the gold mines of the Transvaal in particular, dwarfed her interests everywhere else on the continent. At the end of the nineteenth century, Britain supplied about two-thirds of the region's imports worth £15 million per annum, while total investment in the gold mines stood at some £74 million, of which Britain accounted for an estimated 70 per cent. Surely here, if anywhere in Africa, gentlemanly capitalism reigned supreme? J.A. Hobson, of course, notoriously thought that British intervention was 'driven by a conspiracy of financiers', but this is not a line of argument which finds any favour with Cain and Hopkins. Instead they opt for an interpretation which is curiously close to the one formulated by Robinson and Gallagher in *Africa and the Victorians*; that is, 'the inpouring of trade and capital [into the Rand] combined with a[n Afrikaner] nationalist reaction to crack British paramountcy'. What caused Lord Salisbury and his Cabinet 'to try and force the [South African] republic into a settlement at the risk of war was their fear of losing British South African loyalty;

their hope of impressing Afrikanerdom with a sense of imperial strength; and their determination to halt the decline of their paramount influence'. Assuming, above all, that Kruger's republic would dominate Britain's South African colonies and determine the region's future unless it was forced into a compromise settlement, Salisbury's government 'committed itself at last to dictate terms at all costs'.⁴² This is essentially the same position adopted by Cain and Hopkins.

The power and potential of the Transvaal had greatly expanded [as a result of the discovery of gold], and the prospect of a Canadian solution to Britain's problems in South Africa was now threatened by the emergence of a rival possibility: the creation of a 'United States of South Africa' under Afrikaner control.⁴³

But in following Robinson and Gallagher in this regard, Cain and Hopkins make much the same error as their predecessors. Both sets of authors appear to believe that the threat posed to British supremacy was the rise of Kruger's Afrikaner republic. Yet this is manifestly *not* what worried Selborne when he penned his influential Memorandum in March 1896. Described by Robinson and Gallagher as 'perhaps the best evidence of the fundamental considerations which inspired Chamberlain and Selborne henceforward and which in the end dragged the ministry into the Boer War',⁴⁴ and accepted as such by just about every scholar who has worked on the war, its full version warrants careful scrutiny. As demonstrated below, this is significantly different from the truncated version printed in *Africa and the Victorians*. That Selborne took as his 'postulate...[the fact] that the Transvaal is going to be by far the richest, by far the most populous part of South Africa, that it is going to be the natural capital, state and centre of South African commercial, social and political life' is clear enough. He was further of the opinion that 'if South Africa remains as now a congeries of separate States, partly British Colonies and partly Republics, it will inevitably amalgamate itself into a United States of South Africa'. But what was likely to precipitate this 'cataclysmic' outcome was not the present 'Afrikaner-dominated republic'. On the contrary, observed Selborne:

if the Transvaal were always going to remain a Dutch Republic, I admit that this danger would not be so imminent. Racial jealousies might temporarily postpone the effects of commercial interests. But... the Transvaal cannot permanently remain a Dutch Republic.

There has never been a census; but the best information obtainable gives a maximum of 25,000 male Boers and a minimum of 50,000 Uitlanders, of whom $\frac{3}{4}$ are British. Before Jameson's criminal blunder the Uitlanders were said to be pouring into the Transvaal at the rate of 500 males per week. Just think what would be the result of 10 or of 20 years of an immigration maintained at one fifth or one tenth of this rate! Therefore according to all the experience of history, this country so powerful in its future wealth and population *must be a British Republic if it is not a British Colony; and I cannot myself see room for doubt but that a British Republic of such great wealth and so large a population situated at the geographical centre of political South Africa would assuredly attract to itself all British Colonies in South Africa.*⁴⁵

Whether viewed from Whitehall or the City, British financial and commercial interests on the Rand were flourishing before the war.

The existence of the Republic did not prevent British exporters from enjoying most of its trade...It mattered little to the British manufacturer and merchant whether the Rand trade passed through colonial ports or through Delagoa Bay. Neither did the investor demand to see pro-British politicians governing the Rand, before he would put his money in it.⁴⁶

Indeed, this awkward fact had impressed itself upon British policy-makers in the period before the Jameson Raid as well as afterwards. As the then High Commissioner, Sir Hercules Robinson, had explained to Chamberlain in November 1895, however much Randlords and uitlanders might object to Kruger's government, they had little desire to see the Transvaal inside the British Empire: 'They dislike[d] the native policy of England – they dislike[d] the meddling of the House of Commons and of the philanthropic societies.'⁴⁷ It was the looming prospect of a 'capitalist republic', British but outside the Empire, which worried the Colonial Secretary. Chamberlain concluded:

Whatever defects may exist in the present form of Government of the Transvaal, the substitution of an entirely independent Republic governed by or for the capitalists of the Rand would be very much worse for British interests in the Transvaal itself and for British influence in South Africa.⁴⁸

While Robinson and Gallagher recognized how this concern crucially influenced British attitudes in the months immediately preceding the Raid, their misreading of Selborne's post-Raid deliberations led them to think that the threat perceived thereafter by Selborne and Chamberlain was one posed by an Afrikaner republic rather than the spectre of a British one. But at the same time, Robinson and Gallagher appreciated that whatever challenge Kruger did embody, it was not to the City of London or the gold mining industry as a whole. From this it followed that 'intervention in the Transvaal was hardly needed to turn it either into a market or a field of investment'.⁴⁹ This being so, they concluded, the causes of the war must lie elsewhere. Selborne, however, was contemplating a deeper paradox – it was the very success of British and foreign investment which might require imperial action to be taken.

IV

What does the 'balance sheet' of *British Imperialism* and Africa look like in view of the preceding three sections of this chapter? That gentlemanly capitalism can account satisfactorily for the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 seems well established. When the scramble for tropical Africa is considered, however, its explanatory power appears to be limited. The region where the City's financial interests were virtually non-existent is also the one where the concept of gentlemanly capitalism is weakest. Cain and Hopkins themselves, notes Darwin, seem

uncertain how far British intervention was driven by decision-makers at home, by a new breed of 'mega-merchants' on the spot, by pressure groups appealing to the 'national interest' or by the sub-imperialism of pocket pro-consuls.⁵⁰

Nor is the wider context given as much attention as it might be. As one historian wrote in 1903:

The world is...more than ever before, one great unit in which everything interacts and affects everything else, but in which also everything collides and clashes.⁵¹

It is one thing for Cain and Hopkins to demonstrate that past portraits of British decline have been overdrawn; quite another for their argument not to accommodate the unparalleled transformation of global conditions

which witnessed the rise of Germany and the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Paul Kennedy has observed:

The transfer of industrial technology to the United States, Imperial Germany, later Russia and Japan, created new centres of economic and strategic power where previously none had existed. British industry was no longer supreme, its commerce was hit by rival manufactures and foreign tariffs, its naval supremacy was ebbing away, its empire was much more vulnerable.⁵²

In these radically changed circumstances, a 'far less confident' Britain was 'taking imperialist measures to ward off decline'.⁵³ It is an observation which could be extended to cover France as well. Surely it is no coincidence that the two powers least transformed by the 'Second Industrial Revolution' were also the ones who seized most of tropical Africa? So pronounced was the impact of this shift in the balance of power on France that a powerful case could be made for the Partition as a whole owing more to French commercial calculations and the Quai d'Orsay than it ever did to British concerns, whether those of the City of London or those of the 'official mind of British Imperialism'.

So far as this chapter is concerned, what some of these problems suggest is that Cain and Hopkins might have been better advised to resist the temptation of situating their interpretation in the context of the Partition's established historiography. All too often, the result has been debate at cross purposes. As they themselves acknowledged, the logic of their overall argument is to downplay the significance of the Scramble for tropical African territory. Generally speaking, the region did not attract the interest of the City. The latter's attention was focused on Canada, Australasia and 'informal empire' in Latin America and elsewhere. The further difficulty, of course, is the perennial one of definition. What is meant by 'imperialism' and/or by 'empire'? Nonetheless, it may be possible to identify two intertwined processes at work. The first of these constitutes the core of Cain and Hopkins's analysis. Characterized by massive financial flows, British Imperialism went from strength to strength in this period – that is, after c. 1870. One or two important exceptions aside, however, the dynamic expansion overseas of 'gentlemanly capitalism' did not turn on territorial annexation. By contrast, vested British interests in tropical Africa, usually those most threatened by the changes associated with the Second Industrial Revolution, looked to colonial acquisitions to bolster their position. This second process witnessed a huge increase in the size

of the British Empire in Africa, but it was characterized by caution as much as calculation; by peripheral as often as metropolitan impulses; by defence rather than offence. Granted that Cain and Hopkins are primarily concerned with imperialism, and their critics are largely interested in empire, perhaps Cain and Hopkins should simply have conceded ground of so little concern to them instead of fighting on such unfavourable terrain in the first place.

Arguably, these issues find their most complicated expression in Southern Africa, where the interests of 'informal imperialism' appear not always to have coincided with those of territorial empire. Well aware that late-nineteenth-century South African history bristles with snares for the unwary, Cain and Hopkins attempted to follow what seemed to be the most judicious historiographical path. But by taking this route, they may have lost sight of how to deploy the concept of 'gentlemanly capitalism' to best advantage. Although they assert at one point that 'where City and service interests were most prominently represented [as in Southern Africa]...it was there that Britain showed the greatest vigour in promoting her claims',⁵⁴ in practice the role which they grant gentlemanly capitalism in the region is unexpectedly modest. In doing so, they may well have sold the concept short. To start with, their argument is unnecessarily confined to the Cape and the Transvaal. After all, Southern Rhodesia and by extension Northern Rhodesia, were acknowledged by contemporaries as exemplifying the 'relationship between a good or bad share market on the one side and a British Colony in the stage of tender infancy on the other'. 'Rhodesia', declared one newspaper in 1898, 'is a country which, almost avowedly is intended to be built up, or at least forced upward, by aid of gold mining and land dealing on the £1 share limited liability principle.'⁵⁵ Much more importantly, in the hotly debated case of the gold mining industry of the Transvaal, the weight of the City of London's interests was no less for having been misjudged by later observers. If the reading of the Selborne Memorandum suggested earlier in this chapter is correct, it opens up the prospect of seeing the Transvaal before 1899 in a new and intriguing light. Given the degree of dominance enjoyed by British trade, as well as the Transvaal's marked dependence on the City for investment, loans and other financial services, by most criteria the South African Republic was already part of Britain's informal empire. This suggests that the relationship between economic imperialism, informal empire and territorial empire is not only ambiguous, as many scholars have realized.⁵⁶ There were circumstances in which it was antagonistic.

Notes

- 1 P. Cain and A. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2000* (London, 2002), 335–6.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 337.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, 311.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 361.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 338.
- 7 For earlier versions, see Cain and Hopkins, 'The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas, 1750–1914', *Economic History Review*, 1980, 33, 4; *idem*, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas, II: New Imperialism, 1850–1914', *Economic History Review*, 1987, 40, 1.
- 8 Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 337.
- 9 See, particularly, G. Ingham, 'British Capitalism: Empire, Merchants and Decline', *Social History*, 1995, 20, 3; G. Krozweski, 'Rethinking British Imperialism', *Journal of European Economic History*, 1994, 23, 3; I. Phimister 'Africa Partitioned', *Review*, 1995, 18, 2; J. Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: the dynamics of territorial expansion', *English Historical Review*, 1997, 22, 447; C. Newbury, 'Great Britain and the Partition of Africa, 1870–1914', in A. Porter (ed.), *Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol. III. The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999); and R. Dumett (ed.) *Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Imperialism. The New Debate on Empire* (Harlow, 1999).
- 10 R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians. The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London, 1961), 120. See also Darwin, *Britain, Egypt and the Middle East. Imperial policy in the aftermath of war 1918–1922* (London, 1981), 5–6.
- 11 Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 313, 315. See also Cain, 'Hobson Lives?, Finance and British Imperialism 1870–1914', in S. Groenveld and M. Wirtle (eds), *Government and the Economy in Britain and the Netherlands since the Middle Ages* (Zutphen, 1992).
- 12 A.L. al-Sayyid-Marsot, 'The British Occupation of Egypt from 1882', in Porter (ed.) *Oxford History of the British Empire*, 654.
- 13 Hopkins, 'The Victorians and Africa: a Reconsideration of the Occupation of Egypt, 1882', *Journal of African History*, 1986, 27, 2.
- 14 Porter, "'Gentlemanly Capitalism" and Empire: the British Experience since 1750?', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1990, 18, 285.
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- 20 Notably Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Harlow, 1973); and Cain, *Economic Foundations of British Overseas Expansion 1815–1914* (London, 1980).
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- 25 Cain and Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas, II: New Imperialism', 4.
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- 40 Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians', 629.
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