

suicide remains inaccessible and difficult to fully know or understand. Therefore, *A Sadly Troubled History* also raises questions about the nature of archival sources and knowledge and our modes of inquiry in utilizing these. Weaver ends his book with a reminder that historians might never really enter into the pain of their subjects, and he allows the last word to come from one New Zealand woman who acknowledged that her own anguish over her mental health was also baffling to medical science.

Weaver writes this book with curiosity and with compassion. He is driven by a real hunger to understand why people in some contexts find it necessary to take their own lives. Often, his research team, as he reports in the book, had to take a break from the relentlessly sad material and discuss it; as he says, 'this is not research for the faint of heart' (p.xvi). However, the reading audience for this history is lucky that Weaver has ventured into this difficult work, because this book is more than just a significant and stellar contribution to historical debates; in fact, it sets a very high bar for historians in social history fields everywhere.

CATHARINE COLEBORNE

University of Waikato

The Britannic Vision: Historians and the Making of the British Commonwealth of Nations, 1907–48. By W. David McIntyre. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009. xvi + 317pp. UK price: £65.00. ISBN 978-0-230-22781-1.

IN PROFESSOR MCINTYRE'S LATEST BOOK on the Commonwealth, he focuses mainly on the period of what came to be called the 'British Commonwealth of Nations', a 'short-lived group' that 'flourished in the first half of the [twentieth] century'. It received such definition as it ever received in the Balfour Declaration of 1926 and the Statute of Westminster of 1931. This is what he describes as the Britannic vision. It 'embraced a world where independence and unity could be combined' [p.ix].

The structure of the book is novel, and though it involves some repetition, helpful. Part One, entitled Historiography, offers studies of some 17 'historians', who contributed to practice and policy, debate and definition. The category is, perhaps appropriately, somewhat diverse. Some of the 17 were civil servants and politicians, some classicists, some propagandists. Perhaps the book's sub-title draws the net rather wide, even for a period when historians were more likely to be counted as 'public intellectuals' than they are in our fallen age, certainly in the countries of 'the Commonwealth', if not in the US. In treating his characters, McIntyre avoids any attempt to apply terms like 'realist' or 'constructivist'. Perhaps they were often, of course, both.

The second part of the book is called Terminology. This explores the meaning of concepts and forms of words developed and employed within the British Commonwealth of Nations. It contains excellent expositions of notions like 'responsible government', 'dominion', 'dominion status', 'home rule', 'imperial preference', 'imperial defence'. The explanations are succinct, skilful, perceptive, laced at times with a touch of humour. Perhaps McIntyre could have told us in addition how premiers and prime ministers came to be distinct. Not to mention why ministers are still labelled 'Honourable' outside Britain, but not inside.

The longest part of the book is the third, entitled, a little misleadingly, Chronology. In fact it deals, chapter by chapter, with the series of changes through which the British Commonwealth emerged and mutated, describing and analysing them in a manner both accessible and authoritative. The first covers the rejection of any kind of imperial federal system; the second with the Irish Free State; the third with the Statute of Westminster; the fourth with India; the fifth with the role of the Crown, the concept of 'external association', the inclusion of republics and the adoption in the late 1940s of an idea that had appeared

in the 1920s, that of the monarch as Head of the Commonwealth. I missed — perhaps only as a Southeast Asianist — an account of Burma's insistence on independence outside the Commonwealth. Perhaps the UK was prepared to create a precedent for an Indian Republic but not for a Burmese one. Would the Karens have behaved less desperately if the connection had been maintained, even though Britain could never have openly intervened in their favour?

An Epilogue deals briefly with the 'Commonwealth' from the 1950s. McIntyre shows that the British government recognized that some territories would not be viable — either by size or experience — as independent states, but most of them nevertheless became independent. Despite the inventiveness officials continued to display, it proved impossible to devise some 'mezzanine' category for them once the goal of independence had been set and endorsed by example. Now there are over 50 members, all of which, however, must see some advantage in the relationship.

Indeed, in a world of great disparities of power, it is not surprising that being a member of associations is an important object of the diplomacy of a small or medium state. The world of empires has given way to a world of states, and partly as a result of the way empires were created, and then decolonized, those states are numerous, diverse and sometimes more or less non-viable. In some cases it is a matter of joining associations, such as ASEAN, where small states hope to gain security against larger neighbours without inviting the support or intervention of greater powers. In the case of the Commonwealth, it has been mostly a matter not of joining, but of remaining in, an association that has evolved so that members have attained independence within it.

Comparisons can be drawn. So, too, perhaps, in the case of relationships with the US. The words the New Zealand diplomat Frank Corner used in 1953 may be apposite. 'What . . . we are all seeking to establish . . . is a kind of Dominion status with the United States, a right to be consulted in Pacific and Far Eastern affairs'. The 'source of power' on the Western side was now the US, not the UK, 'and we are therefore seeking to establish the right to some share in the exercise of that power'. The US, he thought, was not ready to grant it. The British had granted it only when they had to.¹

The history of the British Commonwealth of Nations was short, its greatest moment coming near the end, when the tremendous collaboration of the Second World War seemed to validate the idea that voluntary cooperation was in fact stronger than compulsory. But it might also be seen as part of a longer imperial and post-imperial history. Empire, as Malcolm MacDonald put it, was 'a fleeting, passing phase'. Their 'second empire' the British tended to see as a transition towards a world of states. It was on their interests, not their empire, that, as Palmerston said, the sun never set.

How they handled their empire, and how they disposed of it, has often been told, but rarely with the mix of critical insight, humanity and wisdom that McIntyre so generously deploys.

NICHOLAS TARLING

The University of Auckland

NOTE

¹ Corner to McIntosh, 20 February 1953, in Ian McGibbon, ed., *Unofficial Channels*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1999, p.126.