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Making Connections: John Darwin and his Histories of Empire

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This special issue of the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* is offered as a tribute to John Darwin's contribution to our understanding of the history of empire and its endings. To mark the occasion of John's retirement from teaching at Nuffield College and in the history faculty at the University of Oxford, in the articles that follow former students and colleagues seek to draw on some of his ideas and insights and apply them to new areas.

Working in quite disparate fields, all of the contributors take John's writings as a starting point for fresh research, showing how they continue to shape and lead enquiry across a wide range of areas and eras.

John's interest in sites of empire, and in global lives, can in part be traced to his own upbringing. His father worked as a civil engineer in India, Venezuela, Canada, and what are now Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Sri Lanka. Born in Exeter in 1948, John grew up in an atmosphere of projected departures. When he was nine the family upped sticks for South Africa. At the time of the Sharpeville Massacre he was struck by the sight of armoured cars drawn up on the Port Elizabeth seafront, preparing to suppress a predicted mass uprising in the 'townships'. Early history lessons at a school where he was the only 'Brit' presented him with an Afrikaner nationalist interpretation of British imperialism as a force oppressing whites and undermining civilization. In the wake of Macmillan's 'Winds of Change' speech, the young Darwin's school cap was kicked around the playground to shouts of 'Rooinek go home'. The family left South Africa soon afterwards, on a ship filled with whites fleeing the newly independent Belgian Congo.

In these personal experiences of the end of empire lay the roots of some of John's subsequent academic interests, not least his continuing fascination with South African history and politics (which resurfaced in his books *The Empire Project* and *Unfinished Empire*).² Inspiring teachers and mentors also played a role. After secondary school in the New Forest John attended New College, Oxford, where he was taught by Keith Thomas, a powerful teacher and at that time considered almost dangerously radical in his 'sociological' approach to history. Subsequently John moved to Nuffield to undertake graduate study, supervised by Jack Gallagher who was then (with Anil Seal) engaged in the radical revision of the conventional pieties around Indian nationalism. Gallagher's range of interests and reading was breath-taking, and so was his language. Supervisions lasted for several hours, with copious supplies of alcohol and nicotine, and left his students with a sense that their topic was the most fascinating in the world – if only you could remember what it was. Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Gallagher's thinking was his insistence that empire was a connected system: he was contemptuous of what he called the 'parish pump' approach to colonial history, which ignored a colony's place in its wider setting. Because (famously) he insisted on taking 'informal empire' as seriously as its formal counterpart, almost no part of the world was outside his range of interests: to all intents he was a 'global' historian. For John, as an academic apprenticeship, supervision by Gallagher was quite extraordinarily mind-expanding.

Decolonisation

At the age of 24 John moved to the University of Reading to take up a permanent lectureship, before his doctoral work was complete. In the early 1970s Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* remained an excellent field guide to life in a history department. Absolute power was

exercised by the great medieval historian Jim Holt, supported by other senior denizens of the ‘corridor of power’. Ineffectual resistance operations were mounted by others from the ‘corridor of impotence’. Hugh Thomas enlivened proceedings in seminars fuelled by large quantities of Algerian red and glamorous and exotic speakers: one Basque terrorist leader delivered his talk from a crouching position on the floor, in case of snipers.

John’s doctoral research bore fruit in the form of his book *Britain, Egypt, and the Middle East*.³ Here, John vividly conveyed the transformation of British power in the aftermath of the First World War, in a key region of imperial influence. This was a study of high politics with connectivity at its core: in examining how a small group of individuals in Cabinet sought to navigate political and strategic challenges, he delineated the broader assumptions that would guide British imperialism writ large for the remainder of the interwar period. John had also explored this theme in an article on “Imperialism in Decline?” for *The Historical Journal* (1980), where he presented British responses to the manifold crises of this period not in terms of simple retreat, but rather as tailoring imperial power and relationships to changing circumstances in order to maintain influence. In their willingness to posit the British empire as a world system – and to take on the implications of such a framework – these early works were both an engagement with Robinson and Gallagher’s “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, and a foreshadowing of an approach Darwin would take further in *Britain and Decolonisation* and *The Empire Project*.⁴

In 1984 John returned to Oxford (and Nuffield) to replace David Fieldhouse as Beit Lecturer, a post which he held until retirement. When John joined the history faculty Ronald Robinson was Beit Professor: few other colleagues in the faculty at that time had interests stretching beyond England, Britain, or Western Europe. Over the years that followed John found

himself required to supervise doctorates on almost every part of the world beyond Europe, including the Falkland Islands, China, Texas, the Boer War, Persian Gulf, South East Asia, Indian forests, the Anglo-Russian Entente, inter-war naval policy, the British press and empire, and law and land in New Zealand, among other topics. Supervisory familiarity with the subjects under discussion was not always extensive: ‘Well, you tell me...’ often proved a useful response when a student raised an uncomfortably direct factual question.

Being supervised by John was an experience that shaped the direction that many of us would take in future academic careers. It fundamentally influenced the way we approached our work and set the gold standard for inspirational and open-minded scholarship. Always supportive, always humorous, often with his historical atlas open on his coffee table at the very same page (the Middle East) from month to month, year to year, John asked his students searching questions and shared his many thoughts about their topics. One usually left his comfortable Nuffield study feeling energised, but also flabbergasted as to how much you still didn’t know or understand about your thesis topic. John never told you what to think, and never expected you to think the same way that he did. It was up to you to make your thesis your own and to make a success of it, as so many of his D.Phil. students did.

For John doctoral supervision proved one of the most rewarding elements of a job that also encompassed undergraduate and Master’s teaching, lecturing, classes and research seminars, plus endless committee work and college administration. John was Senior Tutor at Nuffield for five years: at that time, when students came looking for him, his personal assistant did her best to help them in what she fondly referred to as their search for ‘the Elusive Pimpernel’. Some believe that this was another skill learned at the feet of Jack Gallagher.

As an ‘extra-European historian’ (in the history faculty ‘Imperial and Commonwealth History’ seemed at that time to be the home for everything that was not Britain, Europe, or the US) John taught alongside generous, supportive, and stimulating colleagues including Tony Kirk-Greene, David Washbrook, and Judith Brown (who arrived at Oxford as Beit Professor in 1991). For neophyte postdoctoral students, the Friday afternoon Imperial and Commonwealth History research seminar in such company could be a forbidding experience. A particular and regular highlight was John’s polite and friendly line of questioning of the seminar speaker: this generally ended with him having, in an entirely non-confrontational fashion, undermined the entire basis of the speaker’s central argument, while said speaker nodded in agreement throughout. In the history faculty Jan-Georg Deutsch was John’s closest colleague for more than a decade. Jan-Georg inspired deep affection from all those who worked with him.

At Oxford, moving on and outwards from his work on the early-twentieth-century crisis of empire in the Middle East, John developed a reputation as the leading historian of the politics and policy making of ‘decolonisation’. Notable was his panoptic view of the subject, which was only just being exposed to proper historical scrutiny as UK public archives began to be opened up (although not, as was subsequently discovered, all of them).⁵ Darwin’s *Britain and Decolonisation: the Retreat from Empire in the Post-war World* (1988) became required reading for all those studying the twentieth-century history of empire. The book built on the approach adopted in John’s earlier work, arguing that decolonisation was a ‘systemic’ process that was understood as such by British policy makers, and which had to be approached by historians as something taking place in the context of an ‘imperial system’. Understanding decolonisation involved doing more than narrating a hundred different stories of the end of empire in a hundred different places: the topic had to be examined as a whole.

This was another example of the theme of connectedness that runs through so much of John's work.

Empire Projects

During the 1990s John also started to peg out his claims as one of the leading historians of the nineteenth-century British empire. Here the key early work was his essay "Imperialism and the Victorians: the Dynamics of Territorial Expansion". This picked up agendas which Gallagher had set running, and took them in new directions. In this article, John returned to the fundamental division identified by Robinson and Gallagher in the 1950s, between 'informal' and 'formal' empire, and the 'central problem' which accounts of Victorian imperialism needed to explain: 'why informal imperialism became the vehicle of expansion where it did; why formal empire was extended in some regions but not others; and why only some zones of informal imperialism were later absorbed into the formal empire'. The expansive energies emanating from Victorian Britain – economic, military, and ideological – were formidable, but hardly capable of exerting hegemony over the entire world, or even over a significant proportion of those areas in which British agents had developed important interests. Rather, British power on the ground was always focused in, and often largely restricted to, key 'bridgeheads' – the near endless variety of forms that British overseas influence could take, and the performance of which went so far towards explaining 'whether British influence grew, or was transformed into formal or informal empire'. A bridgehead might fail or wither over time, or act to draw a broader territory into an informal empire, or provide the means to form the basis of a formal empire.⁶ The essays below by Fletcher, Mark-Thiesen and Mihatsch are merely the latest to engage with the possibilities suggested by Darwin's concept.

These ideas were further developed in *The Empire Project*. Here, Darwin again picked up on Gallagher's insistence that the British empire was best thought of as a world system, comprised of diverse, interconnected, and continually evolving components.⁷ The various sub-elements of this system, distributed widely across the globe, had to be harnessed and locked together to deliver imperial wealth and power, in a forever changing and, during the twentieth century, increasingly doomed fashion.⁸ Darwin emphasised that empire was not the projection of power out from the centre, but rather the tying together of a whole range of local structures of production, exploitation, and control, as a means to further the growth of that system and defend it from internal and external challenges. The ability of any one agent or government to direct this world system was limited. The British empire was characterised by a 'chaotic pluralism' of interests at home and overseas, all seeking to secure their own ends and further their own agendas. This was 'an empire of beachheads and bridgeheads, half-conquered tracks, half-settled interiors, mission-stations and whaling stations, barracks and cantonments, treaty-ports on the up (Shanghai was the best) and treaty ports with no future'.⁹

The Empire Project focused mainly on what John called 'imperial politics' – 'the almost continual debate over the terms of association by which the various member states (including Britain itself) were bound to the British system'.¹⁰ His pluralistic account and explanation of the history of British imperialism was further developed in *Unfinished Empire*, moving well beyond 'imperial politics' to tackle the social, economic, and military inequalities of Britain's world system. This major work again emphasised the provisional, chaotic, and constantly evolving nature of British empire over three centuries. Behind the 'façade' of empire churned 'a mass of individuals, a network of lobbies, a mountain of hopes', competing for the attentions of imperial and colonial authorities. British agents of empire interacted,

cooperated, and fought with non-European allies, clients, and subjects. ‘The result was an empire of hybrid components, conflicting traditions, and unsettled boundaries between races and peoples: a source of constant unease as well as extraordinary energy.’ London might attempt to call the tune, but across this vast and dispersed agglomeration of geopolitical power, few listened very carefully to Westminster or Whitehall. New deals with local elites, black and white, had constantly to be made to keep the façade standing.¹¹ Colonial wars and the savage repression of resistance with massive deployments of exemplary violence were, similarly, endemic in a chaotic, constantly changing empire. Tensions among the imperial powers, often prompted by the unrestrained commercial expansion of their citizens and subjects, were similarly pervasive, and generated considerable anxieties in Europe’s chancelleries, but almost never broke out into wars between European states over colonial possessions.

Both *The Empire Project* and *Unfinished Empire* wrote the settler colonial empire firmly into the narrative of British imperialism, emphasising processes of migration and settlement and the conflicts with the original owners of the land that they provoked. This reflected one of John’s other major intellectual endeavours of this period and his involvement with a group of historians, mainly based in London, seeking to restore and rethink the place of the ‘dominions’ (the so-called ‘white settler’ colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa) in the history of empire. This prompted a series of ‘British world’ conferences (one of the highlights was John’s keynote musings on ‘Emu and Empire’ in Cape Town) and formed the basis of one of John’s contributions to the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, “A Third British Empire? The Dominion Idea in Imperial Politics”.¹²

In the century after 1850, the British world provided an outlet for the excess production, investment, and population of the British Isles, a testing ground (at relatively safe distance) for social and political experiments, and an agricultural and mineral hinterland. For the late-Victorians, settler colonies were always just one part of the tripartite overseas empire Britain had amassed, along with the dependent empire and the Raj, and informal empire in Latin America and across Asia.¹³ Pride in colonial progress was twinned with concern over how to foster, protect, and (however gently) influence the course of settler colonial development – reflecting ‘the curious ambivalence’ that characterised the late-Victorians’ imperialism more broadly: ‘at once anxious and boastful, euphoric and gloomy.’¹⁴ And yet, as Darwin argues, it was the empire of ‘emigration’ that interested metropolitan Britons most before 1914 and gave them the greatest hope thereafter.¹⁵ In the wake of the South African War, when a more efficient organisation of Britain’s imperial system had become of paramount importance, ‘British world power came to depend more and more upon partnership with the White Dominions’.¹⁶ Here:

The remarkable loyalty of the “overseas British” and their economic efficiency made them the most reliable overseas part of the whole British world-system, contributing a million men for military service in the First World War (as many as India), and more in the Second, as well as (from Canada especially) vital industrial and financial resources.¹⁷

As such, the Third British Empire which emerged during the first half of twentieth century, became increasingly centred on the relationship between Britain and the white dominions, while ‘many of the most thoughtful British imperialists came to regard Anglo-Dominion relations as the key Imperial problem, and their continued adhesion to the principle of Imperial unity as worth almost any constitutional concession’.¹⁸ Whatever its distinctive characteristics, however, for Darwin the white settler empire was always closely integrated in

wider processes of British imperialism. Its history, he argued, had to be better integrated (rather than set apart) from broader narratives of imperial and global history.¹⁹

The Global History of Empire

With Peter Carey (then at Trinity College), Alan Knight (Professor of Latin American History), Richard Drayton, the late Patrick Wormald, and others, John launched an abortive ‘World History Seminar’ in the mid-1990s. Despite a star-studded line-up of speakers, an audience could not be found. However, Global History would yet have its day at Oxford. John’s effort to stimulate interest in that field stemmed from his wide, voracious reading, well beyond the historiography of empire, spanning his entire career and going back to his student days. John reads across borders and without boundaries. His role as doctoral supervisor of all things non-European also contributed in a modest way to this departure. From the late 1990s postgraduate students at Oxford began to explore themes of connectivity in their own seminars and theses; he has been a good friend to what became the student-led Transnational and Global History Seminar. In 2011 (with crucial help from Chris Wickham, then head of the history faculty) the Oxford Centre for Global History was established under John’s direction, an event that coincided with Jamie Belich’s arrival as the new Beit Professor (Belich is another prominent exponent of the global approach). This sudden recognition of the importance of Global History, and the intellectual excitement it generated (among medievalists as well as modernists) in many ways crowned John’s achievements within Oxford’s history faculty.

John’s work had long been driven by a desire to locate British imperialism in a global context, with geopolitics at the centre. In *Unfinished Empire* he argued that

The British were able to build a world empire because they exploited the opportunities of global connectedness more fully than their rivals. But they had to wait until the means of connection lay ready to hand, and until their own cocktail of assets could be used to advantage.²⁰

But it was John's book *After Tamerlane* that, for many students of imperial history, opened a window onto a vast new vista of truly global history. While empire was its key theme, this was not a Euro-centric history. Unlike many other global historians, John's work has not been the history of one part of the world writ large. *After Tamerlane* genuinely sought to look at the world in a way that decentred Britain and Europe. It further developed the idea, present in much of John's earlier work, that empire is about connectedness, about linking up different parts of the globe in an ever-shifting and ever-challenged combination in order to provide the basis of world power. An imperial centre could to some extent deploy that power to serve its own interests, but it could never claim total hegemony. In *After Tamerlane* John traced those shifting global connections and concatenations of power over five centuries, right up to the present. He showed how the centres of imperial power, and the systems of global connectivity upon which they each in turn relied, altered dramatically over time.²¹

John's triple-whammy of three major monographs within five years was the stuff of any departmental REF-coordinator's dreams (or nightmares), and surely stands as one of the outstanding achievements of historical scholarship of his generation. His work continues to set the agenda for research in imperial and global history. A forthcoming book on port cities and globalisation c. 1830-1930, promises (yet again) to open new windows on the imperial past and to illuminate in fresh and provocative ways the global and transnational connections that have shaped the modern world.

This Collection

This is not the first collection to reflect on the significance of John's work. A 2015 roundtable in the *Journal of British Studies*, for example, offered stimulating commentary on questions of scale, method, and orientation.²² But whereas that collection focused on the 'big books' among John's recent output – notably 2009's *The Empire Project* – this volume ranges more widely across his career, engaging with earlier work on decolonisation, 'decline' and 'the dynamics of territorial expansion' in particular. As part of this, while all the articles in our collection engage with aspects of John's work, they also operate across a number of different scales of analysis: from case studies of transnational communities, state formation and military intervention to imperial politics, inter-imperial comparison, and global historical frameworks.

Karl Hack's opening essay offers a wide-ranging reflection on the history and historiography of decolonisation, noting how the development arc of John's own career paralleled decolonisation itself. In working towards a new typology of decolonisation, Hack's essay is itself a recognition of the centrality of geopolitical thinking in Darwin's approach to studying empires. The essay traces Darwin's use of the term 'world system' back to the work of Jack Gallagher and explores the development and proclivities of the 'Oxford tradition' of imperial history and Darwin's place within it. Hack critically reflects on the continuing relevance of the Oxford tradition today, by identifying both the limits of this historiographical approach, and where its contributions remain welcome and necessary – not least in terms of seeking a deeper, structural understanding of the rising powers of our contemporary world.

Robert Fletcher's essay considers how far late Tokugawa Japan was subject to forms of British imperialism. To do this, it picks up and interrogates the concept of the 'bridgehead', that key idea developed in Darwin's seminal article of 1997, 'Imperialism and the Victorians'. Fletcher explores how this concept might be used to re-examine the early years of the treaty port of Yokohama, the fitful nature of British interest in Japan at this time, and Britain's decision, in 1863, to bombard the coastal city of Kagoshima. Drawing together disparate historiographies, Fletcher draws out how larger global patterns meshed with complex local circumstances. The messiness of this hitherto neglected historical collision reflects wider patterns identified by Darwin: the chaotic nature of empire, driven by multiple agents in a range of registers, working at odds as much as in concert. Like Darwin's work, this article is also a contribution to our understanding of categories of formal and informal empire, and the blurred and shifting boundary between them.

Cassandra Mark-Thiesen and **Moritz A. Mihatsch** pick up on similar themes, particularly relating to imperial and colonial statecraft and power, in the very different setting of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Liberia. Was this a territory of European or American informal empire? Was it a 'failed' bridgehead that did not generate significant gains for imperial powers? Would it be better viewed as a site of resistance to European and American imperialism, taking on some of the political and cultural trappings of these powers, largely in order to resist their attempts to control it? Or should Liberia itself be viewed as an empire or aspiring empire, copying European methods in its attempts to impose its power over the African interior, in order to exploit the region for the benefit of a coastal elite? Like Japan, Liberia seldom appears in standard accounts of modern imperialism. In their article, Mark-Thiesen and Mihatsch draw out continuities and discontinuities across the long nineteenth

century and remind us of the importance of paying close attention to local complexity and specificity. In this regard the authors channel Darwin's interest in the haphazard, patchy, and often limited nature of imperialism and past globalisation (or semi-globalisation as Darwin characterises it).²³ Liberia, the authors argue, was shaped but not overwhelmed or entirely transformed by the incursion of global capitalism in its imperial form.

Benjamin Mountford's essay moves on to highlight another of John's distinctive contributions, his role in helping to lead new research into the history of the so-called 'British world'. Focussing on the 1887 Colonial Conference, Mountford emphasises the chaotic, multi-polar nature of this distinctive element of Britain's world-system. The dominions, his article shows, were not a simple bulwark of imperial authority doing the bidding of Westminster or Whitehall. While most of the British overseas remained loyal to the empire, they also developed political agendas and expansionist energies of their own. In much of his work on Britain's 'Awkward Squad' of settler colonies, Darwin pushed against Ronald Robinson's contention in "The Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism" (1972) that settlers were ideal pre-fabricated collaborators.²⁴ By looking at Anglo-Australian relations in the 1880s, Mountford's article takes a similar position: drawing out the consequences of settler colonies becoming a 'sub-imperial' force in their own right, keen to project imperial power and to articulate their own vision of the imperial future.

Berny Sèbe's article is a contribution to the growing literature on inter-imperial dialogues, reminding us that empires did not operate in isolation from one another. This was perhaps especially true in the era of decolonisation, as colonial officials eyed the attempts of their neighbours and rivals to navigate a period of profound geopolitical change. In his article Sèbe examines the private archive of Tomás García Figueras, a leading administrator of Spain's

North African empire and a proponent of the importance of Africa to Spain. Over the course of his career and writings, García Figueras dissected contemporary developments in the British and French empires, reflecting on their potential significance for his own. Questions of decline and its management, and an awareness of trans- and inter-imperial contacts and connections, were important themes in John's pioneering work in the study of decolonisation, and to which he would return in *After Tamerlane*. In this piece, Sèbe similarly seeks to locate his subject as one shaped by a large, overarching pattern of interpretation, but explores its implications from a micro rather than a macro-historical perspective.

Nicholas Owen adopts a wider scale of analysis to problematize purported relationships between the experience of colonial rule, decolonisation, and the survival of democracy. Engaging with questions of interest to scholars in politics and international relations, democratisation studies, and history, Owen's article is an example of the multi-disciplinary approach that Darwin has always sought to nourish (itself a reflection of his long-term contribution to scholarly life at Nuffield College). In examining the myriad uses to which forms of democracy were put in the latter years of British rule – 'the imperial uses of "democratic innovation"' – Owen builds on Darwin's interest in critically examining the politics of imperial 'decline', while challenging the romanticisation of decolonisation and democracy. In *Unfinished Empire*, Darwin insists that we 'need a history of empire that explains more convincingly how Britain's imperial world was constructed' and deconstructed; one which does 'justice to the extraordinary variety of colonial societies – and hence to the variety and complexity of their post-colonial successors'.²⁵ Owen's article responds to this suggestion, drawing together insights from across the imperial and postcolonial world.

Margret Frenz's essay brings together two of Darwin's central pre-occupations: decolonisation and global interconnectedness. It picks up on the wider interest in connected histories of decolonisation, as advanced by Martin Thomas and others, but develops this in another direction to consider the less-frequently-referenced (in English, at least) history of Portuguese decolonisation.²⁶ While much work on the connected histories of decolonisation tends to focus on imperial actors on the one hand, or anti-colonial nationalists on the other, Frenz illuminates a different element of the global picture: the interaction of post-colonial and imperial powers (India and Portugal) and the impact of this interaction on diaspora communities – in this case, 'Indians' in the Portuguese empire. Darwin argued in *Britain and Decolonisation* that while British leaders hoped that ending colonial rule might prolong post-colonial influence, Portugal resolved to hold on to all vestiges of formal imperial control, even at great cost, as the only way to maintain its own status as a world power. Frenz adds meat to the bones of this assertion, and explores the implications of that calculation for a community that had made connections across the Indian Ocean of its own, and which now became a pawn in the international politics of decolonisation.

Key to Darwin's work has long been the argument that historians of Britain should acknowledge the importance of extra-European empire to Britain's own development, particularly the role of links between metropolitan and colonial societies. Equally, historians of empire need to be cognisant of the dynamism of British economics and politics as one determinant of the shifting nature of the imperial world system. **Rieko Karatani** takes up this theme in her examination of immigration and nationalisation law, looking at the interplay of British politics and the legacies of empire. Her article highlights the shifting definitions of 'Britishness' during the last two decades of the twentieth century, as British citizenship was simultaneously defined in more exclusive terms and expanded to include those living in the

remaining British territories of empire. Karatani's piece harks back to Darwin's long-running interest in 'imperial politics', albeit in the setting of a largely post-imperial age. As she argues, while one of the aims of new legislation was, in the words of Robin Cook, 'to lay the Empire to rest', imperial legacies remain to this day.

In the final essay in this collection, **Ali Parchami** returns to the panoptic, interdisciplinary approach and systemic themes which have characterised much of Darwin's writings. The resonances with Darwin's *After Tamerlane*, and with the essay by Hack that opens this collection, are obvious. Parchami deploys ideas about empire, and particularly about 'imperial overstretch', and applies them to today's creaking liberal international world order. If empires are world systems, then is today's world order (with its attempts to encourage free trade, multilateral and multinational institutions, and a universal culture of democracy) a 'pseudo-empire'? Many of the critics of today's established order certainly think so, and target the system-building aspirations of US and other powers, seeking to unravel that system and in some cases construct one of their own that would tie different parts of the globe together into an alternative imperial system. Darwin's picture of the chaotic pluralism lurking behind empires also seems relevant here: the competing factions of policymakers, commercial and military, and humanitarian campaigns all play a part in sites of pseudo-empire around the world today. Finally, Parchami asks if we are living through another era of 'decline', akin to that which shaped the worlds and work of Robinson, Gallagher, and Darwin, and that has been addressed so powerfully by John in so many of his writings. Are we, as Parchami suggests, writing at the moment of the birth of a new geopolitical order?

One of the central preoccupations of John's work, again picking up the legacies and unfinished business of Robinson and Gallagher, has been the task of defining what exactly

empire is. His focus on connectivity and world systems has advanced, and broadened, our understanding of the nature of empire. Plural, chaotic, and constantly changing empires inevitably blurred around the edges (and indeed, often at the centre too) into a range of other things. Connections seldom came together to form a neat, isolated whole: autarkic imperial systems only existed in the dreams of empire builders. The contributors to this special edition share John's sense of the many things that empire could be, and accept that hard-and-fast categorisations may in this regard be counterproductive. They similarly follow John's lead in accepting the centrality of geopolitics to any clear understanding of the nature of empire and the course of imperial history. An insistence on the importance of geopolitics, and of the broad changes in systems and structures of global power that occurred over time, sits at the core of John's contribution to imperial and global history. Again, the volatility and unpredictability of the contemporary world underlines the importance of recognising this, just as did the massive changes of the 1950s and 1960s that accompanied the birth of imperial history in its critical form, and which spawned many of the key ideas and debates which continue to shape the subject. Ongoing geopolitical transformations, like John's continuing contribution to scholarship and the essays in this special issue, offer proof – if it were needed – that far from being a languishing subject, the history of empires has still not been definitively written. While we might not like empires, this is not a good reason to avoid studying them. We ignore the imperial past at our peril.

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1. Many thanks are due to Laura Lanceley, who undertook significant editorial and coordination duties in putting this collection together.
 2. Darwin, *The Empire Project*; Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*.
 3. Darwin, *Britain, Egypt and the Middle East*.

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4. Gallagher and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade"; Gallagher and Robinson, *Africa and the Victorians*.
 5. Anderson, 'Mau Mau in the High Court'.
 6. Darwin, "Imperialism and the Victorians", 614, 629.
 7. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 3.
 8. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, xi.
 9. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 3.
 10. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 8.
 11. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, xi-xii.
 12. Darwin, "A Third British Empire?".
 13. Darwin, "A Third British Empire?", 65.
 14. Darwin, "Empire and Ethnicity", 393. On British gloominess, see also Darwin, "The Fear of Falling".
 15. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 292-3.
 16. Darwin, "A Third British Empire?", 66-7.
 17. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 11.
 18. Darwin, "A Third British Empire?", 66-7.
 19. In this John was keenly aware of the potential limitations of isolating British world history from imperial history more broadly. See here Bright and Dilley, "After the British World".
 20. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 387.
 21. Darwin, *After Tamerlane*.
 22. Burton, 'Empire of the Book'.
 23. Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 502-3.
 24. Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations'.
 25. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 7-8.
 26. Thomas, Moore, and Butler, *Crises of Empire*; Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*; Thomas, *Fight or Flight*; Potter and Saha, *Global History, 'Imperial History and Connected Histories of Empire'*.

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