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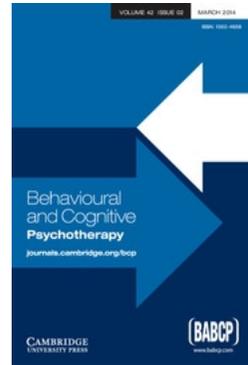
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ADAM SMITH AS ADVOCATE OF EMPIRE, c. 1870–1932*

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines how The wealth of nations (1776) was transformed into an amorphous text regarding the imperial question throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Adam Smith had left behind an ambiguous legacy on the subject of empire: a legacy that left long-term effects upon subsequent British imperial debates. In his chapter on colonies, Smith had proposed both a scheme for the gradual devolution of the British empire and a theoretical scheme for imperial federation. In response to the growing global popularity of protectionism and imperial expansionism, the rapid development of new tools of globalization, and the frequent onset of economic downturns throughout the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, turn-of-the-century proponents of British imperial federation formed into a formidable opposition to England's prevailing free trade orthodoxy – Cobdenism – a free trade ideology which famously expanded upon the anti-imperial dimensions of The wealth of nations. Ironically, at the turn of the century many advocates for imperial federation also turned to Smith for their intellectual inspiration. Adam Smith thus became an advocate of empire, and his advocacy left an indelible intellectual mark upon the burgeoning British imperial crisis.*

Richard Cobden wrote his first free trade tract, *England, Ireland, and America*, in 1835 just before embarking upon a fruitful visit to the United States. He observed in the pamphlet that, sixty years before, Adam Smith had ‘promulgated his doubts of the wisdom and profitableness’ of Britain’s colonial policy. If Smith had only lived to see the United States become Britain’s ‘largest and most friendly commercial connection’, Cobden exuberantly concluded, ‘how fully must his opinions have coincided with all that we have urged on this subject!’¹ Indeed, within fifteen years after Cobden’s Smithian speculation, Britain’s imperial policy would become subsumed by the Victorian free trade ideology known as Cobdenism. Cobdenism of course drew its inspiration from

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¹ Reprinted in George Bennett, ed., *The concept of empire: Burke to Attlee, 1774–1947* (London, 1962; orig. edn, 1953), pp. 165–6.

Cobden himself, the radical British parliamentarian and prominent leader of the Anti-Corn-Law League (1839–46). As his comment above suggests, Cobden idealistically expanded upon the anti-imperial dimensions of Adam Smith's *The wealth of nations* to conclude that international free trade and noninterventionism would ultimately bring about world peace. Correspondingly, Cobdenism condemned British mercantilism and colonialism for being atavistic, monopolistic, and unnecessarily expensive enterprises. Aside from the 'cheap loaf', however, many of Cobdenism's pacific promises went unleavened during the so-called *Pax Britannica*—the middle decades of the nineteenth century—and fewer still in the decades to come. Following a brief flirtation with trade liberalization in the mid-nineteenth century, much of the Western world began turning instead to Anglophobia, economic nationalism, agricultural subsidization, and colonial expansionism as preferred prescriptions for the late nineteenth century's frequent economic ills.² In response, proponents of British imperial union at the turn of the century evolved into a formidable opposition to the prevailing Cobdenite orthodoxy well into the early decades of the twentieth century. And many of the most adamant advocates for imperial unity turned to none other than Adam Smith for their intellectual inspiration.³

Duelling Smithian disciplines thus arose. On the one hand, Adam Smith's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Cobdenite adherents used his theories to argue for gradual imperial devolution and empire 'on the cheap'. On the other hand, various proponents of imperial federation throughout the

² Anthony Howe, 'From *Pax Britannica* to *Pax Americana*: free trade, empire, and globalisation, 1846–1946', *Bulletin of Asia-Pacific Studies*, 13 (2003), pp. 137–59.

³ University of Edinburgh Professor J. Shield Nicholson's Smithian imperial advocacy notably stands out in the historiography, as I will discuss in greater detail in Section III. For the idea of 'Greater Britain' and the imperial federation movement, see especially Duncan Bell, *The idea of Greater Britain: empire and the future of world order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); Duncan Bell, ed., *Victorian visions of global order: empire and international relations in nineteenth-century political thought* (Cambridge, 2008); Duncan Bell, 'From ancient to modern in Victorian imperial thought', *Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), pp. 735–59; E. H. H. Green, 'The political economy of empire, 1880–1914', in Andrew Porter, ed., *Oxford history of the British empire: the nineteenth century* (5 vols., New York, NY, 2001), III, pp. 346–71; Jack Gaston, 'The free trade diplomacy debate and the Victorian European common market initiative', *Canadian Journal of History*, 22 (1987), pp. 59–82; J. E. Tyler, *The struggle for imperial unity, 1868–1895* (London, 1938); Trevor R. Reese, *The history of the Royal Commonwealth Society, 1868–1968* (London, 1968), pp. 64–79; J. E. Kandle, *Federal Britain* (London and New York, NY, 1997), ch. 3; J. E. Kandle, *The colonial and imperial conferences, 1887–1911* (London, 1967); and Ged Martin, 'The idea of imperial federation', in Ronald Hyam and Ged Martin, eds., *Reappraisals in British imperial history* (London, 1975), pp. 121–39. Martin also traces these ideas of imperial federalism back to the 1820s and briefly notes that 'Empire federalists' cited Smith 'as a rival authority', in 'Empire federalism and imperial parliamentary union, 1820–1870', *Historical Journal*, 16 (1973), pp. 76, 80. Alternatively, Kandle begins his study in the 1600s in *Federal Britain*. For imperial federation, race, and the non-white British empire, see also Theodore Koditschek, *Liberalism, imperialism, and the historical imagination: nineteenth-century visions of a Greater Britain* (Cambridge, 2011). For a good summary of the federative schemes from the 1850s to 1930s, see Seymour Ching-Yuan Cheng, *Schemes for the federation of the British empire* (New York, NY, 1931).

British world sought to use Smith's theories to overturn the predominant Cobdenite hands-off imperial approach and instead, with a firm grip, bring the empire closer than ever before, politically, commercially, militarily, or some combination of the three.⁴ These latter efforts were strengthened as Britain's economic rivals, especially the United States, Germany, and Russia, increasingly implemented infant industrial protectionist policies rather than British-style free trade.⁵ Protectionists in the United States and other parts of the globe in turn came to view transnational Cobdenite efforts with great trepidation. Such advocacy was frequently viewed as part of a vast British free trade conspiracy that sought to deluge foreign markets with excess British exports, a conspiratorial view that spurred protectionism throughout the globe and further undermined the efforts of the Manchester School to spread Cobdenism abroad.⁶

Even as Cobdenism struggled to gain an international foothold, the rising tide of economic nationalism, the Franco-Prussian War, the 1880s European 'Scramble for Africa', the 1898 US acquisition of a colonial empire, and the Boer War exemplified the fact that protectionism, militarism, and imperial expansionism were alive and well. Making Cobdenite efforts all the more difficult, the British Lion's adherence to the gold standard began receiving the lion's share of the blame from insurgent bimetallicists in Britain and the United States for the late nineteenth century's unpredictable price fluctuations and tumultuous boom-and-bust economic cycle.⁷ With the predominantly goldbug

⁴ For recent studies on imperial networks and the British world, see, inter al., Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and globalisation: networks of people, goods and capital in the British world, c. 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 2010); Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, *The British world: culture, diaspora and identity* (London, 2003); and Philip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis, eds., *Rediscovering the British world* (Calgary, 2005).

⁵ Benjamin H. Brown, *The Tariff Reform movement in Great Britain, 1881–1895* (New York, NY, 1943); Marc-William Palen, 'Protection, federation and union: the global impact of the McKinley tariff upon the British empire, 1890–1894', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 38 (2010), pp. 395–418; Frank Trentmann, 'The transformation of fiscal reform: reciprocity, modernization, and the fiscal debate within the business community in early twentieth-century Britain', *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), pp. 1005–48; Edmund Rogers, 'The United States and the fiscal debate in Britain, 1873–1913', *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), pp. 593–622.

⁶ Marc-William Palen, 'The conspiracy of free trade: Anglo-American relations and the ideological origins of American globalization, 1846–1896' (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2011); Marc-William Palen, 'Foreign relations in the Gilded Age: a British free trade conspiracy?', *Diplomatic History*, 37 (2013), pp. 217–47; Anthony Howe, *Free trade and liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford, 1997), p. 267.

⁷ E. H. H. Green, 'Rentiers versus producers? The political economy of the bimetallic controversy, c. 1880–1898', *English Historical Review*, 103 (1988), pp. 588–612; A. C. Howe, 'Bimetallicism, c. 1880–1898: a controversy re-opened?', *English Historical Review*, 105 (1990), pp. 377–91; Green, 'The bimetallic controversy', *English Historical Review*, 105 (1990), pp. 673–83; Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, pp. 199–204, 233. For the American bimetallic reaction, see Palen, 'The conspiracy of free trade'. Martin Dauntun offers a persuasive argument for the continued success of the gold standard until the First World War in 'Presidential address: Britain and globalisation since 1850: 1. creating a global order, 1850–1914', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 16 (2006), pp. 1–38.

Cobdenites increasingly on the defensive, turn-of-the-century proponents of Greater Britain found Adam Smith's theoretical speculations on the feasibility of imperial federation a source of realistic inspiration owing to the ongoing development of new tools of globalization, particularly steamship lines, trans-continental railroads, trans-oceanic telegraphs, and canals.⁸ Such technological marvels were seemingly eliminating time and space, thereby bringing the geographically disparate British empire – and the Smithian idea of Greater Britain – closer than ever before.⁹

The wealth of nations (1776) was transformed into an amorphous text regarding the imperial question throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, depending upon whose eyes pored over Smith's ambiguous speculative chapter on colonies.¹⁰ Such British imperial attempts to co-opt Adam Smith's work from the anti-imperial Cobdenite school have been touched upon but have yet to receive extensive exploration.¹¹ In *The idea of greater Britain* (2007), for instance, Duncan Bell notes that Adam Smith was frequently called upon as an authoritative voice, setting 'the tone as well as the terms for much nineteenth-century theorizing' on the subject of imperial unity.¹² Donald Winch briefly acknowledges that Smith was claimed as 'either an enlightened anti-imperialist or a far-sighted proponent of imperial

⁸ For studies of the connection between imperialism and technological advancements, see Lewis Pyenson, 'Science and imperialism', in Robert Cecil Olby and Geoffrey N. Cantor, eds., *Companion to the history of modern science* (London and New York, NY, 1990); Robert W. D. Boyce, 'Imperial dreams and national realities: Britain, Canada, and the struggle for a Pacific telegraph cable, 1879–1902', *English Historical Review*, 115 (2000), pp. 39–70; Daniel Headrick, *The tools of empire* (New York, NY, 1981); Daniel Headrick, *The tentacles of progress: technology transfer in the age of imperialism, 1850–1940* (Oxford, 1988); Daniel Headrick, *The invisible weapon: telecommunications and international politics, 1851–1945* (Oxford, 1991); and Richard Drayton, 'Science and the European empires', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 23 (1995), pp. 503–11.

⁹ Bell, *Idea of Greater Britain*, ch. 3; Duncan Bell, 'Dissolving distance: technology, space, and empire in British political thought, 1770–1900', *Journal of Modern History*, 77 (2005), pp. 523–62. From around 1850–75, some Cobdenites also favoured greater imperial integration owing to these technological developments. See Anthony Howe, 'British liberalism and the legacy of St. Simon', *History of Economic Ideas*, 17 (2009), pp. 107–20.

¹⁰ Knorr called Smith's theories on colonies 'the most revolutionary advance in the evolution of British thought' in his analysis of the subject. See Klaus E. Knorr, *British colonial theories, 1570–1850* (Toronto, 1963; orig. edn, 1944), pp. 175–95. Other good summaries of Adam Smith and imperialism can be found, among others, in Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to empire: the rise of imperial liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of trade: international competition and the nation state in historical perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Andrew S. Skinner, 'Adam Smith and the American economic community an essay in applied economics', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (1976), pp. 59–78; Donald Winch, *Riches and poverty: an intellectual history of political economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge, 1996); Donald Winch, *Classical political economy and colonies* (Cambridge, MA, 1965); and Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's politics: an essay in historiographic revision* (Cambridge, 1978).

¹¹ I should note that the analysis and examples included herein are by no means exhaustive, but illustrative of the turn-of-the-century usage of Adam Smith's advocacy of imperial federation.

¹² Bell, *Idea of Greater Britain*, p. 66.

federation'.¹³ E. A. Benians observed that Smith's ideas for a united empire were given new life after around 1870 as the federative spirit opened new 'possibilities, undreamed of by Adam Smith, of preserving the empire'.¹⁴ Klaus Knorr briefly touched on Smith's ambiguous colonial theories and the resultant 'confusion, misunderstanding, and disagreement among his interpreters'.¹⁵ Donald Wagner in turn observed in passing that both 'those who attacked and those who defended the empire took comfort in his writings, for when he touched imperial questions he was somewhat like the man who . . . mounted his horse and rode off in opposite directions'.¹⁶ Adding a dash of hyperbole to Wagner's equestrian simile, Adam Smith's intellectual limbs were subsequently drawn and quartered, ideologically pulled in opposing imperial directions, and stretched alongside globalization's newly laid technological tools. In the hands of turn-of-the-century proponents of Greater Britain, Adam Smith would become an advocate of empire.

I

Upon the successful overturning of the protectionist Corn Laws in 1846, Britain ushered in a new era—the so-called *Pax Britannica*—a hegemonic era dominated by Cobdenite ideology in England, and complemented by a preponderance of British naval and manufacturing power.¹⁷ Cobdenism asserted that the interdependence of international free trade would ultimately lead to world peace, and most Cobdenites correspondingly developed a strong anti-imperial

¹³ Winch, *Smith's politics*, p. 148.

¹⁴ E. A. Benians, 'Adam Smith's project of an empire', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 1 (1925), p. 283. For such imperial interest, see Reese, *History of Royal Commonwealth Society*, ch. 1; and Edward Beasley, *Empire as the triumph of theory: imperialism, information, and the Colonial Society of 1868* (London and New York, NY, 2005). For studies of Smith's general legacy, see for instance Samuel Fleischacker, 'Adam Smith's reception among the American founders, 1776–1790', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (2002), pp. 897–924; Keith Tribe, 'The German reception of Adam Smith', in Keith Tribe, ed., *A critical bibliography of Adam Smith* (London, 2002); John E. Crowley, 'Neo-mercantilism and *The wealth of nations*: British commercial policy after the American revolution', *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), pp. 339–60; Emma Rothschild, 'Adam Smith and Conservative economics', *Economic History Review*, n.s., 45 (1992), pp. 74–96; Richard F. Teichgraber, "'Less abused than I had reason to expect": the reception of the *Wealth of nations* in Britain, 1776–1790', *Historical Journal*, 30 (1991), pp. 337–66; Knud Haakonssen and Donald Winch, 'The legacy of Adam Smith', in *Cambridge companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, 2006); and Winch, *Classical political economy and colonies*.

¹⁵ Knorr, *British colonial theories*, pp. 187–94. Gerard M. Koot points to a more general crisis over Adam Smith's legacy during this period in *English historical economics, 1870–1926: the rise of economic history and neomercantilism* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 10–14.

¹⁶ Donald O. Wagner, 'British economists and the empire II', *Political Science Quarterly*, 47 (1932), p. 74.

¹⁷ Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*; Anthony Howe, 'Free trade and the international order', in Fred M. Leventhal and Roland Quinault, eds., *Anglo-American attitudes: from revolution to partnership* (Aldershot, 2000).

strain, one that emphasized non-interventionism in foreign affairs and a minimalist hands-off colonial policy. Richard Cobden of course had most famously expounded the new ideological doctrine, with Adam Smith as his muse.¹⁸ Upon Cobden's death, his English friends thereafter established the influential Cobden Club (1866–1982) to maintain Cobdenism at home and to spread it to the globe.¹⁹ As Frank Trentmann has described, Britain was fast becoming a 'free trade nation', a true 'national and democratic culture, reaching all classes and regions, mobilizing men, women, and children, and cutting across party political divides'.²⁰ Impotent imperial proponents of Greater Britain – fearing the adverse application of the Manchester School's soft touch upon imperial governance – wrung their hands and reluctantly bided their time.²¹

Adam Smith himself unintentionally had laid the groundwork for his later ambiguous anti-imperial legacy. He had finished writing *The wealth of nations* (1776) as the British Empire's thirteen American colonies agitated for representation within the imperial government. Smith was somewhat sympathetic

¹⁸ For more on Cobden's foreign policy outlook see Peter Cain, 'Capitalism, war, and internationalism in the thought of Richard Cobden', *British Journal of International Studies*, 5 (1979), pp. 229–47; William Harbutt Dawson, *Richard Cobden and foreign policy: a critical exposition, with special reference to our day and its problems* (London, 1926); Nicholas C. Edsall, *Richard Cobden, independent radical* (Cambridge, 1986); J.A. Hobson, *Richard Cobden: the international man* (New York, NY, 1918); Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*; Anthony Howe, 'Richard Cobden and the Crimean War', *History Today*, 54 (2004), pp. 46–51; Anthony Howe and Simon Morgan, *Rethinking nineteenth-century liberalism: Richard Cobden bicentenary essays* (Aldershot, 2006); Knorr, *British colonial theories*, pp. 166–74; Bernard Semmel, *Rise of free trade imperialism: classical political economy and the empire of free trade and imperialism, 1750–1850* (London and New York, NY, 1970), pp. 158–75; Oliver MacDonagh, 'The anti-imperialism of free trade', *Economic History Review*, 14 (1962), pp. 489–501; David Nicholls, 'Richard Cobden and the international peace congress movement, 1848–1853', *Journal of British Studies*, 30 (1991), pp. 351–76; Richard Francis Spall, 'Free trade, foreign relations, and the anti-corn-law league', *International History Review*, 10 (1988), pp. 405–32; Miles Taylor, 'Imperium et libertas? Rethinking the radical critique of imperialism during the nineteenth century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 19 (1991), pp. 1–23.

¹⁹ Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, pp. 116–41; Anthony Howe, 'Cobden club (act. 1866–1982)', *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2005); Palen, 'The conspiracy of free trade'; Palen, 'Foreign relations in the Gilded Age'.

²⁰ Frank Trentmann, *Free trade nation: commerce, consumption, and civil society in modern Britain* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2008), p. 2; Frank Trentmann, 'Political culture and political economy: interest, ideology and free trade', *Review of International Political Economy*, 5 (1998), pp. 217–51. For a provocative interpretation of imperialism and British socialism during the period covered here, see Gregory Claeys, *Imperial sceptics: British critics of empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge, 2010). See also H. C. G. Matthew, *The liberal imperialists: the ideas and politics of a post-Gladstonian elite* (London, 1973); Ross McKibbin, *The evolution of the Labour party, 1910–1924* (New York, NY, 1974); and A. J. A. Morris, *Edwardian radicalism, 1900–1914: some aspects of British radicalism* (Boston, MA, 1974).

²¹ As Anthony Howe describes, 'only slowly was the discontent of agrarians, manufacturers, and imperial federationists fused, under the aegis of Britain's historical economists, into the Tariff Reform assault on the body of Cobdenism pronounced dead a decade earlier' in the 1890s. Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, p. 195.

to the colonial demands, and quite critical of Britain's mercantilist colonial enterprise. 'Under the present system of management', Smith had noted, 'Great Britain derives nothing but loss from the dominion which she assumes over her colonies'. He also had pragmatically recognized that England would likely never voluntarily grant independence to its North American colonies. Presaging some of the later emotional nationalistic motivation for Greater Britain, he also had acknowledged that such devolution of colonial control was inevitably 'mortifying to the pride of every nation', a national-imperial pride that would prove difficult to circumvent for the next century and a half.²²

One of Adam Smith's proposed solutions to the colonial problem had favoured gradual decolonization of the British empire. If Great Britain were to adopt such a policy—afterward often diminutively referred to as 'Little Englandism' by its critics—the nation would be 'immediately freed from the whole annual expense of the peace establishment of the colonies'. Thus, by 'parting good friends', Smith had predicted, England would likely even procure treaties of free trade and military alliances from its former colonies. He was similarly quite condemnatory of imperial trade preference, as such protectionist blocs were 'frequently more hurtful to the countries in favour of which they are established than to those against which they are established'.²³ Smith also had foreseen with some prescience the nationalistic obstacles that would face his Cobdenite successors' 'most visionary' enthusiasm for decolonization.²⁴

Adam Smith's acolytes—anti-imperial and imperial alike—would subsequently become quite selective in their reading of his ambiguous solution to the colonial problem. Particularly, turn-of-the-century proponents of Greater Britain throughout the empire would conveniently overlook Smith's advocacy of decolonization and his critique of trade preference, even as the empire's Cobdenites would gloss over Smith's proposed scheme of imperial federation.

In contrast to his advocacy of imperial devolution, Smith had suggested as an alternative that the colonies—should they remain within the imperial fold—ought to share in the costs of imperial defence, although he had expressed great doubt that the colonies would ever pay their 'proper proportion' of military expenses. He had also worried that distance, different constitutions, and a general unwillingness to pay taxes for the defence of disconnected and disparate colonies would prove too difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, as a theoretical alternative to gradual decolonization, Smith's proposed solution was that of a representative imperial assembly that would inspect and superintend 'the affairs of every part of the empire', while still

²² Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* (Edinburgh, 1843; orig. edn, 1776), pp. 251, 254.

²³ Smith, *Wealth of nations*, p. 259.

²⁴ Goldwin Smith was the most outspoken Cobdenite advocate of British decolonization, and was prone to referencing Adam Smith to support his argument. Duncan Bell notes that Goldwin Smith was himself 'highly selective' in employing 'Smithian arguments against the economic viability of the colonial system'. Bell, *Idea of Greater Britain*, p. 198. For such usage, see for instance Goldwin Smith, *The empire* (Oxford and London, 1863), pp. xvi–xvii, 21–3, 113.

allowing for colonial assemblies to collect revenues for imperial defence. Smith went further – too far even for many later advocates of Greater Britain – suggesting that colonial representation ought to be proportional to its contribution toward imperial revenue, and that the seat of imperial governance should relocate to the centre of greatest revenue: ‘The seat of the empire would then naturally remove itself to that part of the empire which contributed most to the general defence and support of the whole.’²⁵ Presumably, that ‘part of the empire’ would eventually have been somewhere within the wealthy and expansive North American colonies.

Thus, although Adam Smith had expressed many caveats regarding the feasibility of imperial federation, until as late as 1778 he had also offered what he considered a theoretically viable scheme for imperial union, and had even suggested that the British constitution could not ‘be hurt by the union of Great Britain with her colonies’. Rather, the constitution ‘would be completed by it, and seems to be imperfect without it’. He had granted that ‘great difficulties’ lay in the way of effective execution, including colonial prejudices, but were not ‘insurmountable’. The colonists across the Atlantic might unnecessarily fear that the sheer ‘distance from the seat of government’ would inherently lead to oppressive rule. In theory, however, their proportional representation would offer colonists easy protection, as ‘the distance could not much weaken the dependency of the representative upon the constituent’.²⁶

After all, Smith had observed in 1776, the world was already rapidly shrinking. The European discovery of the Cape of Good Hope and the Americas had become ‘the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind . . . By uniting, in some measure, the most distant parts of the world.’²⁷ While certainly an early proponent of globalization and of a theoretical free-trading Greater Britain, in practice Smith was also fearful that the fiscal, geographical, and temporal chasms separating the British empire’s colonies at that time were too imposing to allow for effective colonial representation within an imperial federative system. Such a theoretical imperial federation would, however, appear much more practical a century after the first printing of *The wealth of nations*.

II

Cobdenism’s mid-century potency within British imperial politics began to lose some of its punch by around 1870. Thereafter, as the centenary of Adam Smith’s *The wealth of nations* neared, Smith’s last chapter on colonies would

²⁵ Smith, *Wealth of nations*, pp. 255, 258.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258; G. H. Guttridge, ‘Adam Smith on the American Revolution: an unpublished memorial’, *American Historical Review*, 38 (1933), pp. 714–20; Andrew S. Skinner, ‘Adam Smith and the American Revolution’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 7 (1977), pp. 75–87.

²⁷ Smith, *Wealth of nations*, p. 258.

increasingly be touted in support of imperial projects.²⁸ New non-governmental organizations like the Fair Trade League (1881–91), the Imperial Federation League (1884–93), the United Empire Trade League (1891–1903), the British Empire League (founded 1896), the Tariff Reform League (1903–c.1932), and the Round Table movement (1909–c.1920) found their political influence steadily rising within the empire as the turn of the century witnessed a global turn away from Cobdenism and its unfulfilled promises of international free trade and peace, shifting instead toward protectionism – exemplified by the extreme 1890 McKinley Tariff in the United States – and formal imperial expansionism.²⁹

Over the next sixty years, proponents of Greater Britain worked to expel Cobdenism from its prominent ideological position. Fiscally minded imperial federationists adapted their imperial visions to fit the times, subtly shifting their advocacy back and forth between that of a free trade empire, an imperial customs union, an imperial Zollverein, and an imperial preferential system complemented by protective tariff barriers.³⁰ Cobdenite hands-off imperial policies were also ironically allowing for Britain's self-governing colonies to enact their own protectionist policies, even against the motherland and the other British colonies. Such economic nationalist policies within the colonies gave renewed strength to the idea of a protectionist, preferential Greater Britain as the nineteenth century was turning into the twentieth. These same colonial protective tariff policies would even gain tacit support from the 'gentlemanly capitalists' of the City of London, who were willing to withstand colonial protectionism if such increased revenue streams meant the colonial governments continued to pay down their mounting debts.³¹

From around 1870, theories of imperial federation therefore became increasingly popular. Cobdenite Sir Charles Dilke, for example, famously coined the phrase 'Greater Britain' and espoused his liberal vision of imperial

²⁸ For such early references to Adam Smith's scheme of imperial unity, see for instance Australia's John Edward Jenkins, *The colonies and imperial unity, or, the 'barrel without the hoops'* (London, 1871), p. 28; and Francis Gould Smith, *The Australian protectionist* (Melbourne, 1877), p. 7. Jenkins in fact advocated a free trade empire in the hope of stemming the movement toward protectionism among the self-governing colonies of Canada and Victoria. For this early demand for a free trade empire, see also Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, pp. 213–22.

²⁹ Brown, *Tariff Reform movement*; John E. Kendle, *The round table movement and imperial union* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1975); Palen, 'Protection, federation and union'; Palen, 'The conspiracy of free trade', ch. 8.

³⁰ Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, pp. 215–16; Luke Trainor, 'The British government and imperial economic unity, 1890–1895', *Historical Journal*, 13 (1970), pp. 68–84.

³¹ P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British imperialism, 1688–2000* (London, 2002), p. 185. The City did not, however, offer the same support to the Tariff Reform League. See also Andrew Marrison, *British business and protection 1903–1932* (Oxford, 1996); and Anthony Howe, 'Liberals and the City, c. 1900–1931', in Ranald Michie and Philip Williamson, eds., *The British government and the city of London in the twentieth century* (Cambridge, 2004).

union in his popular 1869 text of the same name at the conclusion of his two-year tour of the British colonies.³² The historian, conservative social reformer, and critic of Gladstonian politics J. Anthony Froude thereafter published *Oceana* (1886) to much acclaim following his own fruitful global journey to South Africa, the United States, and Australasia. *Oceana* quickly became a bestseller, offering its readers a racist snapshot of the Anglo-Saxon 'empire' alongside speculation that the British world would prove to be the driving force behind imperial union and the perpetuation of the British empire.³³ Just a handful of years before, J. R. Seeley, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, authored his own bestseller, *The expansion of England* (1883), encouraging the unification of a British Anglo-Saxon empire, brought together through a shared national identity, religion, and imperial interests. Seeley argued that such a Greater Britain was especially necessary in order to compete with the rising economic powers of Germany and the United States, and to solve the interrelated problem of domestic economic decline. The book would maintain its popularity for more than half a century, both in the United States and throughout the British empire.³⁴

Dedicated advocates of imperial federation, growing in prominence as well as impatience, got creative. In the mid-1880s, the London Chamber of Commerce offered a cash prize for the best essay on imperial federation, with none other than Greater Britain advocates J. A. Froude, J. R. Seeley, and Sir Rawson W. Rawson as judges.³⁵ Exemplifying the incipient return of Adam Smith's advocacy of imperial federation, the first and second prizes went to federative schemes that leaned heavily upon *The wealth of nations* to support their arguments.

³² Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain: a record of travel in English-speaking countries* (New York, NY, 1869), pp. 206–7. For more on Dilke, see Stephen M. Gwynn and Gertrude Tuckwell, *Sir Charles W. Dilke* (2 vols., London, 1917); and David Nicholls, *The lost prime minister: a life of Sir Charles Dilke* (London, 1995).

³³ See also Waldo Hilary Dunn, *James Anthony Froude: a biography* (2 vols., Oxford, 1961–3); Walter Thompson, *James Anthony Froude on nation and empire: a study in Victorian racialism* (London, 1998); Julia Markus, *J. Anthony Froude: the last undiscovered great Victorian* (New York, NY, 2005); Duncan Bell, 'Republican imperialism: J. A. Froude and the virtue of empire', *History of Political Thought*, 30 (2009), pp. 166–91; and Bell, *Idea of Greater Britain*, ch. 5.

³⁴ Ernest R. May, *American imperialism: a speculative essay* (Chicago, IL, 1991: orig. edn, 1967), pp. 129–30, 155, 171, 184, 205. For more on Seeley, see especially Duncan Bell, 'Unity and difference: John Robert Seeley and the political theology of international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 31 (2005), pp. 559–79; Deborah Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the uses of history* (Cambridge, 1980); H. S. Jones, *Victorian political thought* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 55–9; and Daniel Deudney, 'Greater Britain or greater synthesis? Seeley, Mackinder, and Wells on Britain in the global industrial era', *Review of International Studies*, 27 (2001), pp. 187–208.

³⁵ Rawson W. Rawson, at the inaugural presidential address of the Statistical Society of London in 1884, argued that Britain's greatness came primarily from its colonial possessions, tied together through Anglo-Saxon kinship. He also called for a 'fixed and unwavering policy ... that England and her Colonies are "one and indivisible"'. Rawson W. Rawson, 'British and foreign colonies', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 47 (1884), p. 583.

William Greswell, a retired Classics professor from the Cape University in South Africa, took first prize. In his essay, Greswell used *The wealth of nations* as ammunition for his imperial federative salvo, justifying his imperial parliamentary scheme with the knowledge that 'Adam Smith thought that the assembly which deliberates and decides concerning the affairs of every part of the empire ought certainly to have representatives from every part of it'. After all, Greswell noted, more than a century after Smith's publication, 'steam and the great circle sailing have altered previous ideas about distance, and brought us all nearer together, so that the Canadian can reach London more quickly now than a Highlander could fifty years ago'. This scientific revolution undermined not only Adam Smith's lingering late eighteenth-century doubts on imperial federation's feasibility but also the more recent objection of John Stuart Mill that 'countries separated by half the globe do not present the natural conditions for being under one Government or even members of one Federation'.³⁶

Greswell also struck out against the ruling Cobdenite opposition: 'To a certain number of politicians, Imperial Federation conveys the idea of a rampant and crusading imperialism, jingoistic displays and wars all over the earth. The word federation implies a menace.' Without any awareness of contradiction, he brushed aside such cosmopolitan imperial opponents as little more than 'parochial politicians' to whom 'a British Empire extending its formal organization over the world is inconceivable and impracticable'. Doubtless scoring points with at least one of the judges, Greswell also expressed his fear that Froude's vision of *Oceana* might 'pass away as a wraith upon the waves' if the Cobdenites allowed 'the vision of consolidated greatness to glide for ever from our eyes, after catching only a brief and tantalizing vision of its outlines'. Were British imperial unionists 'to succumb to the charge of being dreamers and visionaries', he rhetorically asked, 'because we aspire to raise a structure of empire upon the undoubted loyalty, wealth, good sense, and patriotism of the British race?'³⁷

Greswell was at least happy to note that 'even such violent anti-unionists' as Canada's resident Cobdenite (and formerly Regius Professor at Oxford) Goldwin Smith 'have learnt to change in time their ideas upon our imperial position, and to perceive that when one limb of an empire is severed from it, the whole body must suffer'. Goldwin Smith's conversion was only partial, however, 'as he has always under-rated the most wholesome signs of colonial life, and attached more importance to the centrifugal than the centripetal forces at work in the empire'. As a solution to this perceived centrifugal problem, Greswell suggested that a global voyage might be necessary. After all, much like Froude,

³⁶ William Greswell, 'Imperial federation', in *The five best essays on imperial federation submitted to the London Chamber of Commerce for their prize competition, and recommended for publication by the judges: J. Anthony Froude, Professor J. R. Seeley, M. A., and Sir Rawson W. Rawson* (London, 1887), p. 2; John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on representative government* (London, 1861), p. 324.

³⁷ Greswell, 'Imperial federation', pp. 3-5.

Howard Vincent – a leading member of the Imperial Federation League in England – had transformed from an ‘insularist’ to an ‘imperialist’ following his own travels ‘round the world’ gazing upon the progress of Australasia and Canada. Greswell also noted further good tidings for a Smithian imperial federation; the Canadian government had only just overseen the completion of its transcontinental railroad, and a total of 30,000 miles of railroad now traced throughout – and further connected – the British empire.³⁸

C. V. Smith – formerly of Cambridge University – was Froude’s, Seeley’s, and Rawson’s runner-up essayist on imperial federation. C. V. Smith introduced his essay with a direct quote from *The wealth of nations*: that of Adam Smith’s speculation on how the British constitution would find completion through imperial union. C. V. Smith further noted that Adam Smith’s ‘objection as to Space and Time’ had since been overcome. The distance for travelling between the various parts of the empire, say from New Zealand and Fiji to London, were indeed ‘greater in the present day’, but

the time occupied in it shorter, than from the American colonies in the days of Adam Smith . . . by means of the electric telegraph, intelligence can be transmitted to and from every part of the British dominions with a speed the conception of which never entered into the wildest dreams of our ancestors in the last century.

C. V. Smith thus called for centralized control of imperial telegraphs, railways, roads, canals, and steamship lines for strategic, commercial, and federative purposes.³⁹

Greswell and C. V. Smith were among the first of many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Smithian advocates of imperial federation who would prove adept at wielding the tools of globalization in their ideological battle against the Manchester School. Adam Smith’s imperial arguments correspondingly proliferated throughout the British world. In 1883, for example, Frederick Young, British advocate for imperial federation and prominent spokesman for the Royal Empire League, turned to Smith’s suggestions for an imperial parliament, as Young found them ‘much in accordance’ with his own principles following a tour of Canada and meeting with its proponents of Greater Britain.⁴⁰ Canadian imperial federationists like George Robert Parkin in similar fashion suggested that imperial federation was now ‘a reasonable ideal’, one that had ‘long since commended itself to the philosophic mind of Adam Smith’, and one that was ‘infinitely’ more justifiable and attainable in 1892 than it had been in 1776.⁴¹ Theorists in the United States like Arthur T. Hadley, the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 11–12.

³⁹ C. V. Smith, ‘Imperial federation: suggestions as to the mode in which it can be carried into effect’, in *Five best essays*, pp. 128, 129, 140, 158.

⁴⁰ Frederick Young, *On the political relations of mother countries and colonies* (London, 1883), p. 16.

⁴¹ George Robert Parkin, *Imperial federation: the problem of national unity* (London, 1892), p. 304.

president of Yale University, also turned to Smith's final chapter for 'practical wisdom' following the US acquisition of a formal colonial empire in 1898.⁴²

Imperial federationists like George F. Bowen, William Bousefield, and J. Ellis Parker in turn extolled the wisdom of Smith's 'pregnant words' on how imperial union would make the British constitution complete while also creating a lucrative internal imperial market.⁴³ And, in 1895, Adam Smith biographer John Rae argued that Smith had 'held that there need never be any occasion for separation . . . and that the sound policy to adopt was really the policy of closer union – of imperial federation, as we should now call it. He would not say, "Perish dependencies", but "Incorporate them."⁴⁴ Smith's Cobdenite legacy was coming under siege, surrounded by Smithian imperial unionist assailants. Turn-of-the-century proponents of imperial union found further encouragement following the expression of colonial favour for imperial preference at the 1894 Ottawa Conference, and when Canada's government unilaterally instituted a preferential policy for British goods in 1897.⁴⁵

Cambridge University's historical economist, William Cunningham, began his 1904 study of the decline of Cobdenism by suggesting that any person 'influenced by the political ideas of Sir John Seeley and is true to the economic teaching of Adam Smith, should not hesitate' in supporting an economic reorganization of the British empire. The globe had not followed England's cosmopolitan lead. England's one-sided free trade was 'Cobden's failure' and 'artificial', whereas Seeley and Smith's idea of Greater Britain was only 'natural'. Free trade was a wonderful cosmopolitan ideal that was nevertheless incompatible with the world as it was: a world of nationalism, jingoism, and self-interest. That same year, under the auspices of the Tariff Reform League, Cunningham also published a series of lectures arguing that both Adam Smith and Richard Cobden had been more sympathetic to imperialism and Tariff Reform than their anti-imperial disciples 'might have been inclined to suppose', and Cunningham correspondingly condemned the 'self-complacent' and 'degenerate' Edwardian disciples of Cobdenism.⁴⁶ Advocates of empire,

⁴² Arthur T. Hadley, ed., *Adam Smith's essay on colonies* (New York, NY, and London, 1901), p. vi.

⁴³ George Ferguson Bowen, 'The federation of the British empire', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 17 (1885–6), p. 295; William Bousfield, *The government of the empire: a consideration of means for the representation of the British colonies in an imperial parliament* (London, 1877), p. 19; J. Ellis Barker, *Great and Greater Britain: the problems of motherland and empire, political, naval, military, industrial, financial, social* (New York, NY, 1910), p. 75; Cheng, *Schemes for federation*, pp. 198, 217.

⁴⁴ John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* (London, 1895), pp. 281–2; Knorr, *British colonial theories*, pp. 187–8.

⁴⁵ Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, pp. 214–15, 218. See for example John Davidson, *Commercial federation and colonial trade policy* (London, 1900), pp. 14, 75. New Zealand and South Africa thereafter instituted imperial preferential policies in 1903, followed by Australia in 1908.

⁴⁶ William Cunningham, *The rise and decline of the free trade movement* (London, 1904), preface, pp. 151–2, 158; William Cunningham, *Richard Cobden and Adam Smith*

alongside their attempts to co-opt Adam Smith from the Cobdenites, were now even attempting to co-opt Cobden himself.

Veteran Australian politician James Jefferis – a long-time and influential advocate for the federation of both Australia and the British empire – in similar fashion invoked Adam Smith’s advocacy of empire in his retirement address in 1901 in the wake of Australia’s recent federation. Jefferis drank deeply from the overflowing river of turn-of-the-century Anglo-Saxonist racial ideology, and even sought closer ties with the United States, suggesting that a truer name for Australia’s ‘American cousins’ should be ‘American brothers’. Borrowing both from Smith and the American Revolution, Jefferis advocated for a representative imperial federation:

Adam Smith spoke wisely when he said: – ‘The Assembly which deliberates and decides concerning the affairs of every part of the Empire, in order to be properly informed, ought certainly to have representatives from every part of it’. To this may be added the aphorism admitted by all – ‘No taxation without representation’.⁴⁷

Smith’s idea was now within reach as governments throughout the globe were ‘learning how to conquer time and space’, Jefferis observed. ‘Steam has not yet reached its limit of speed. The telephone and wireless telegraphy are only beginning their beneficent career. On extraordinary occasions’, he suggested, ‘when the Federal Parliament might be suddenly called together to decide on matters that would brook no delay, why should there not be votes by proxy, or in some cases even votes by cable?’⁴⁸ Smith’s problem regarding long-distance colonial representation appeared to have found its solution in the tools of globalization.

In contrast, under the ‘negative movement’ of the Manchester School, ‘the constructive task of preserving a colonial empire’ had been ‘completely reversed’, argued E. Morris Miller, another Australian proponent of imperial federation, in 1911. As a result, ‘the faith of Adam Smith in the Empire’ had been ‘discarded’. Miller noted that ‘it is one of the ironies of economic history that the theories of Adam Smith should have . . . become in the minds of a later generation indistinguishable from Cobdenism’, when in actuality Adam Smith ‘was an Imperial Federationist, and believed in constructive efforts towards imperial consolidation. He realized the intimate connection between commercial development and maritime protection, and eulogized the wisdom of the navigation laws on imperial grounds’. Alternatively, Smith’s delusional Cobdenite disciples ‘could scarcely claim remembrance as empire-builders . . . Their objective was the negation of all that union involved’; their cosmopolitan

(London, 1904), pp. 3, 17. For more on Cunningham, see also Koot, *English historical economics*, ch. 7.

⁴⁷ James Jefferis, *The federation of the British people: a lecture delivered April 15th, at the opening of the forty-second yearly session of the North Adelaide Young Men’s Society* (Adelaide, 1901), pp. 4, 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

vision inevitably and, according to Miller, unfortunately left no room for a nationalistic imperial identity.⁴⁹

Why, Miller then asked, had ‘the anticipations of Cobdenism’ never been realized after holding the empire’s political and ideological reins for so long? Because Cobdenism ‘had ceased to relate itself constructively to the maintenance of a world-wide empire’, Miller answered. Instead, Cobdenites openly ‘admitted that they viewed with complaisance the dismemberment of the Empire, provided they could secure for themselves the advantages likely to arise from trade agreements with the colonies when independent’. Proponents of imperial preference were offering as an alternative not only an imperial tariff system, Miller pointed out, but a ‘community of interests in commerce and communication, whether in transportation or posts, telegraphs and cables, and also affirm its close intimacy with Imperial defence’. He observed that ‘even leading exponents of freetrade principles are not behindhand in this matter, and some of them are urging us to study Adam Smith afresh, particularly as regards his conceptions of the economic bases of empire’.⁵⁰

In particular, Miller noted that the idea of an imperial Zollverein, or ‘internal free trade within the Empire’, was receiving renewed attention thanks to the *Wealth of nations*-inspired writings of Professor Joseph Shield Nicholson at the University of Edinburgh, who likened the British empire ‘to the contiguous territory of the United States’. However, it was an idea, Miller observed much as Froude had a few decades earlier, that had been resurrected from within the British world rather than Great Britain itself: resuscitated first by imperial federationists in Canada, thereafter ‘taken up’ by Jan Hofmeyr of South Africa, and ‘revived’ by Australia’s Liberal prime minister Alfred Deakin in 1907.⁵¹ Adam Smith’s federative project had certainly found a strong local voice throughout the global British empire.

⁴⁹ E. Morris Miller, *Some phases of preference in imperial policy* (Melbourne, 1911), pp. 4, 12, 11. Andrew Wyatt-Walter has made a similar argument in ‘Adam Smith and the liberal tradition in international relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 22 (J1996), pp. 5–28.

⁵⁰ Miller, *Some phases*, pp. 5, 2, 4. This Cobdenite logic was of course quite in keeping with Smith’s proposal for imperial decolonization.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9, 22–3. For Deakin’s support of Chamberlain, see also J. A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: a biography* (Melbourne, 1979), pp. 475–514; Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, p. 241. Similarly, B. R. Wise, once a strong Australian advocate of free trade, became the spokesman of the Australian Preferential League, a Chamberlain supporter, and even suggested that Cobden was no ‘Little Englander’, but if alive would have supported Chamberlain’s reforms. See B. R. Wise, ‘Preferential trade’, 21 Nov. 1903, Sydney, State Library of New South Wales, B. R. Wise papers, 1879–1915, ML MSS 6107, vol. 6, box 2, fo. 12; B. R. Wise, ‘Cobden’s imperial policy’, *London Times*, 28 Dec. 1905; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 Oct. 1905, p. 3; and Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, p. 241.

III

As E. Morris Miller was writing his 1911 essay, Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Reform movement was reaching its Edwardian apex. Chamberlain was himself a onetime Radical Liberal and Cobdenite, having been 'brought up in the school of Mr Bright and Mr Cobden'. But Chamberlain gradually converted into a radical proponent of imperial preference, especially as his hometown of Birmingham attempted with great difficulty to recover from the global depression of the 1890s, and as its industries struggled more and more to compete with the tariff-protected exports of Germany and the United States.⁵² The unwillingness of the empire's self-governing colonies to turn away from protective tariffs provided a further impetus to abandon his vision of a free trade empire for one of imperial preference. In 1903, an ideologically changed Chamberlain ultimately launched a concerted protectionist campaign for imperial unity. The new movement's clarion call to arms also sounded like a declaration of war upon the Cobdenite order.⁵³

Thereafter, the growing popularity of Chamberlain's Tariff Reform movement proved a mounting threat to Cobdenite orthodoxy in England.⁵⁴ Within England itself, Chamberlain's Tariff Reform movement found strong support from the influential Tariff Reform League and myriad other fiscal reform organizations. The new movement also received the mixed support of centrist Liberal Imperialists, along with the backing of the Liberal Unionists and a large segment of Conservatives and the English business community, as well as a wide swath of social reformers and imperial unionists from throughout the empire who were disillusioned with the unfulfilled promises of Cobden and his Edwardian disciples.⁵⁵

⁵² Chamberlain, quoted in the *London Times*, 1 Aug. 1889, p. 6; Roland Quinalt, 'John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain', *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), pp. 623-46.

⁵³ Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, pp. 222, 230.

⁵⁴ Although, fortunately for the latter, the British economy underwent a rapid recovery in the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, severely impeding Chamberlain's protectionist movement. Correspondingly, various Liberal Unionists (inter al., the duke of Devonshire and Goschen) became Unionist free traders after 1903.

⁵⁵ For the British empire's long Tariff Reform movement, see Brown, *Tariff Reform movement*; Sydney H. Zebel, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the genesis of Tariff Reform', *Journal of British Studies*, 7 (1967), pp. 131-57; D. Porter, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the origins of the Tariff Reform movement', *Moirae*, 3 (1978), pp. 1-7; E. H. H. Green, 'Radical conservatism: the electoral genesis of Tariff Reform', *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), pp. 667-92; E. H. H. Green, *The crisis of Conservatism: the politics, economics and ideology of the British Conservative party, 1880-1914* (London and New York, NY, 1995); Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*; Palen, 'Protection, federation and union'; Palen, 'Conspiracy of free trade', ch. 8; Matthew, *The liberal imperialists*, esp. pp. 100-1, 166-7; Trentmann, 'Transformation of fiscal reform'; Rogers, 'United States and the fiscal debate'; A. W. Coats, 'Political economy and the Tariff Reform campaign of 1903', *Journal of Law and Economics*, 11 (1968), pp. 181-229; Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and social reform: English social imperial thought, 1895-1914* (London, 1960), p. 124; Peter Fraser, 'Unionism and Tariff Reform: the crisis of 1906', *Historical Journal*, 5 (1962), pp. 149-66; P. J. Cain, 'Political economy in Edwardian England: the Tariff Reform controversy', in A. O'Day, ed., *The Edwardian age: conflict and stability, 1900-1914* (London,

One such Chamberlain supporter was James Louis Garvin, editor of *The London Observer*, who in 1903 began filially referring to Adam Smith as ‘the father of Imperial Federation’.⁵⁶ Garvin thereafter called for the application of ‘constructive imperialism’, emphasizing that Adam Smith and Cobden had for too long been lumped together. Rather, Britons had ‘strictly to choose between them. Cobden believed and hoped that Free Trade would be the dissolvent of Empire’, whereas ‘Adam Smith’s position was quite opposite . . . Unlike Cobden, he desired the British Empire not to be dissolved, but to be strengthened and perpetuated . . . He desired . . . Imperial Federation and Navigation Laws’. Smith, the ‘greatest of Free Traders’, was thus ‘in favour of a federated Empire upon a protectionist basis’. Garvin then suggested that ‘Mr. Chamberlain has not repudiated the politico-economic ideas of Adam Smith; he has returned to them’.⁵⁷

Across the globe, a similar Smithian imperial defence arose in 1905 from the Australian editor of *The Brisbane Courier*. Adam Smith was no blind defender of free trade as his Cobdenite disciples would have you believe, suggested the paper’s editor. Instead, those two ‘Little Englanders’ Cobden and Bright had ‘made a fetish of the doctrine’, which in reality made various exceptions for protectionism. So too had Smith drawn a very different view ‘with respect to the colonies as compared with his disciples of a later date’. Smith had in fact shown great far-sightedness in his anticipation of a time when an imperial parliament might become feasible. Indeed, Smith had laid out in *The wealth of nations* ‘the whole course of colonial history from the time of the separation of the American States down to the Boer War and Mr Chamberlain’s preferential scheme for the welding together of the component parts of the Empire’. Smith had in fact put forth Chamberlain’s principle of trade preference, the Australian editor argued, a principle that stood out in ‘startling contrast’ to the ‘stiff pedantry of the Manchester school, which regarded the colonies as a nuisance, and nationalism as a hindrance’. Rather, Adam Smith ‘would have

1979); Richard A. Rempel, *Unionists divided: Arthur Balfour, Joseph Chamberlain and the unionist free traders* (Hamden, CT, 1972); Julian Amery, *Joseph Chamberlain and the Tariff Reform campaign (The life of Joseph Chamberlain, vols. v and vi* (New York, NY, 1969); Alan Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British politics, 1903–1913* (New York, NY, 1980); Alan Sykes, ‘The confederacy and the purge of the unionist free traders, 1906–1910’, *Historical Journal*, 18 (1975), pp. 349–66; Peter Fraser, *Joseph Chamberlain: radicalism and empire, 1868–1914* (London, 1966); Andrew S. Thompson, ‘Tariff Reform: an imperial strategy, 1903–1913’, *Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), pp. 1033–54; David Brooks, *The age of upheaval: Edwardian politics, 1899–1914* (Manchester, 1995); Marrison, *British business and protection*; and Rixford Kinney Snyder, *The tariff problem in Great Britain, 1918–1923* (Stanford, CA, 1944).

⁵⁶ James Louis Garvin, ‘The economics of empire’, *National Review*, 42 (1903), p. 5.

⁵⁷ James Louis Garvin, ‘The maintenance of empire: a study in the economics of power’, in Charles Sydney Goldman, ed., *The empire and the century: a series of essays on imperial problems and possibilities by various writers* (London, 1905), pp. 83–5. For more on Garvin and ‘constructive imperialism’, see P.J. Cain, ‘The economic philosophy of constructive imperialism’, in Cornelia Navari, ed., *British politics and the spirit of the age: political concepts in action* (Keele, 1996).

subordinated the letter of absolute free-trade for the sake of the spirit of Imperial unity'. The way to imperial union would likely prove to be a labyrinthine undertaking, the *Courier's* editor warned, but fortunately *The wealth of nations* 'sheds a friendly light on the path, like the glimpse of a home fireside to a traveller on a stormy night'.⁵⁸

Further Smith-inspired support came from Leo Amery – British Conservative parliamentarian and social reformer – who attacked the Cobdenite hands-off policy of imperial governance in *The fundamental fallacies of free trade* (1908). In it, he came to the defence of Chamberlain, noting that the British were only just beginning their 'universal education on the lines laid down by Adam Smith', although Amery admitted that Smith's imperial federation scheme yet appeared out of the range of 'practical politics'. By 1912, the pro-Chamberlain editors of the *Nineteenth Century* similarly warned of the detrimental effects of the 'un-English' policy of Cobdenism's laissez faire subscribers, praising Tariff Reform alongside Adam Smith's support for imperial federation without any hint of contradiction. So too would globalization's tools continue to be touted in favour of Smithian imperial union.⁵⁹

Topping the list of turn-of-the-century voices calling for a Smithian imperial federation was Professor Joseph Shield Nicholson of the University of Edinburgh. Nicholson revered Adam Smith, and few if any at that time could claim to know Smith better. Nicholson's interpretation of Smith and his own views on the subject of imperial unity, however, underwent great change between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. In 1892, for instance, although he certainly granted that Adam Smith had laid out the 'most definite and most practicable scheme ever yet published of Imperial Federation', Nicholson was yet a critic of protectionist schemes of imperial federation.⁶⁰ As late as 1902, he still opposed formal imperial unity, and created something of a furore when he publicly denounced Chamberlain for incorrectly listing Nicholson among his early Tariff Reform supporters.⁶¹

But Nicholson soon began to warm to the idea of realizing Smith's imperial federative scheme as well as to the merits of Tariff Reform, an intellectual thaw that can be gleaned as early as 1904 in Nicholson's insightful introduction to

⁵⁸ *Brisbane Courier*, 14 Jan. 1905, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Garvin, 'Economics of empire', p. 5; Leopold Amery, *The fundamental fallacies of free trade* (London, 1908), p. 197; Duke of Westminster, 'Practical imperialism', *Nineteenth Century*, 72 (1912), pp. 876–7. Charles E. T. Stuart-Linton laid out his scheme for imperial federation during this period, also invoking Adam Smith as inspiration. Stuart-Linton noted as well that the difficulties of his day that 'seemed to stand in the way of these ideas' had been removed owing to the development of 'modern inventions'. Charles E. T. Stuart-Linton, *The problem of empire governance* (London, 1912), pp. 15, 154.

⁶⁰ J. Shield Nicholson, 'Tariffs and international commerce', in A. S. White, ed., *Britannic confederation* (London, 1892), p. 122.

⁶¹ *London Times*, 15 Aug. 1903, p. 4, 31 Oct. 1903, p. 9; Coats, 'Political economy and the Tariff Reform campaign of 1903', p. 214; John Cunningham Wood, *British economists and the empire* (London and Canberra, 1983), pp. 153–61.

the newest edition of Friedrich List's *National system* (1841), an updated reprinting of imperial federationist S. S. Lloyd's 1885 English translation. Nicholson – although ever the staunch defender of Adam Smith – nevertheless now granted that List's anti-Smithian creed contained 'real value' owing to its profound 'principles and fundamental ideas'. Nicholson suggested that British statesmen would 'always' have to reckon with List's ideas, and that they would force many to reconsider their opposition to tariff retaliation, protectionism, and imperial union for the sake of British industrial development.⁶²

With Nicholson's grudging allowance for temporary protectionism, in his 1909 work *A project of empire: a critical study of the economics of imperialism, with special reference to the ideas of Adam Smith*, he now openly called for the creation of a Smith-styled imperial parliament and localized tariffs for the collective defence of the global British empire. His Smithian federative project included an imperial customs union in imitation of the successful American system of internal free trade situated within outward-facing high tariff walls. All were necessary, he put forth, in order to maintain the British empire's oceanic supremacy and imperial defence. In doing so, Nicholson now argued that on the issues of tariffs and imperial expansionism, Adam Smith had not been nearly the cosmopolitan his Cobdenite disciples would suggest. Rather, Smith had been 'intensely nationalist' and 'imperial', whose moral advocacy of empire led logically to his chapter on colonies within *The wealth of nations*, wherein Smith had laid out 'the most thorough scheme of British imperial union ever propounded'. According to the Nicholson of 1909, this was Smith's climactic 'appeal to British statesmen, and to the British people both in the mother country and in the colonies to convert the project of empire into reality'.⁶³ In the hands of perhaps his most avid Edwardian devotee, Adam Smith now emerged as a nationalist, an imperialist, and a protectionist.

Nicholson's defenders noted his and Smith's defence of an imperial parliament and customs union, as well as Nicholson's newfound willingness 'to concede a certain measure of protection against foreign nations for the sake of the enormous advantages which union would bring in its train', thereby stating the case 'with the aid of Adam Smith . . . for a "sane" Protection', a case that was quite in keeping with Tariff Reform.⁶⁴ By the end of the First World War, as many Cobdenites looked with great alarm upon Britain's wartime establishment of protective tariffs and the national flirtation with imperial

⁶² J. Shield Nicholson, introduction to Friedrich List, *The national system of political economy*, trans. Sampson S. Lloyd (London, 1904; orig. edn, 1885), pp. xxvi–xxvii. Koot even places Nicholson, albeit with caveats, in the English 'historical economist' camp and briefly touches upon his imperial project. Koot, *English historical economics*, pp. 155–9.

⁶³ J. Shield Nicholson, *A project of empire: a critical study of the economics of imperialism, with special reference to the ideas of Adam Smith* (London, 1909), pp. x–xi. For criticism of Nicholson's nationalist-imperialist interpretation, see especially Knorr, *British colonial theories*, pp. 187–94.

⁶⁴ F. S. Oliver, 'Mr. Shield Nicholson's "project of empire"', *London Times*, 5 Jan. 1910, p. 5.

preference, Nicholson arrived at the belief that Smith's scheme had finally begun.⁶⁵

The rapid late nineteenth-century development of globalization's technological tools helped reawaken Adam Smith's speculative theory of imperial federation throughout the British world. While such turn-of-the-century Smithian proponents – running the imperial unionist gamut from a free trade empire to a system of imperial preference and protective tariff barriers – did not obtain much substantive success in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, their resurrection of Adam Smith's advocacy of empire would ultimately pay federative dividends. Smithian imperial proponents could claim more tangible success soon thereafter. Imperial unionist forces of various stripes had steadily worn down Britain's Cobdenite fortress throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. The continued maintenance of protectionist policies in the United States, coupled with the onset of the First World War and the Great Depression's subsequent arrival, only added fiscal fuel to the imperial preferential fire.⁶⁶ Imperial historian Klaus Knorr observed as late as the 1940s that a majority of Adam Smith's 'more recent reviewers' were now in agreement that he had 'rejected separation in favour of a thoroughgoing reconstruction of the Empire on the basis of free trade and federation'.⁶⁷ Such protectionist assaults ultimately proved detrimental to the Smith-inspired Cobdenite legacy when, in 1932, Britain itself turned toward protectionism and imperial preference. This British political, economic, and ideological shift effectively demolished what remained of the country's battered Cobdenite bulwarks. This about face may be viewed in part as a victory – albeit a Pyrrhic one – for Smith's imperial unionist disciples. Smith's Cobdenite heirs in turn could claim some vindication of their own in the wake of the Second World War with the subsequent decolonization of the formal British empire, the US hegemonic turn to trade liberalization, a steadfast Anglo-American 'special relationship', and continued friendly relations between Britain and its Dominions.

⁶⁵ Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, pp. 280–1; Wood, *British economists*, p. 116.

⁶⁶ Trentmann, *Free trade nation*; Trentmann, 'The strange death of free trade: the erosion of the "liberal consensus" in Britain, c. 1903–1932', in Eugenio F. Biagini, ed., *Citizenship and community: liberals, radicals, and collective identities in the British isles, 1865–1931* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 219–50; Howe, *Free trade and liberal England*, ch. 8; Ralph A. Young, 'British imperial preference and the American tariff', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 141 (1929), pp. 204–11.

⁶⁷ Knorr, *British colonial theories*, p. 187. In 1928, for example, C. R. Fay, professor of economic history at the University of Toronto, now portrayed Adam Smith as a 'liberal imperialist'. C. R. Fay, *Great Britain from Adam Smith to the present day* (London, 1928), p. 3.