Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital

EDITED BY
MATTHEW BROWN

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Informal Empire in Latin America: 
Culture, Commerce and Capital

EDITED BY MATTHEW BROWN
University of Bristol, UK

Bulletin of Latin American Studies
Book Series: Interdisciplinary
Approaches to Latin America

SERIES EDITORS: NICOLA MILLER, JEAN GRUGEL, DAVID HOWARD, GEOFFREY KANTARIS AND TONY KAPCIA

The Bulletin of Latin American Research (BLAR) has a distinguished history of publishing primary research from a range of disciplines in Latin American studies. Our readers have long been able to draw upon ideas from History, Geography, Politics, International Relations, Anthropology, Sociology, Gender Studies and, increasingly, Cultural Studies. Many of our articles have addressed thematic topics and debates of interest to all Latin Americanists, such as mestizaje, populism or the politics of social movements. This is one of the great strengths of being an area studies journal rather than a discipline-based one. We now hope to complement the multidisciplinarity of the journal with this new book series, which will have an explicitly interdisciplinary focus. We will publish innovative work from scholars who are working across disciplines, raising new research questions and developing new methodologies. The series aims to develop into a major forum for interdisciplinary work in Latin American studies.

This first volume of the series arose from a conference held at the University of Bristol, UK, in January 2007 on the theme of informal empire. The conference and the book both build upon recent advances in the historiography of imperialism and studies of the nineteenth-century modern world, most obviously the work of Ann Laura Stoler, Catherine Hall and C. A. Bayly. The aim of the conference was to consider these new approaches to
informal empire alongside the many still-unresolved questions raised in the debates conducted by Latin Americanists first during the 1970s and again in the 1990s. By juxtaposing political economy and cultural studies, this book breathes new life into the concept of informal empire. It both illuminates the study of British imperialism, from which Latin America is usually conspicuous only by its absence, and provides a sound basis for interpreting the complex processes of nation-building and state-formation in Latin America.
Acknowledgements

The international conference from which this volume springs was an expensive undertaking. It was generously funded by the British Academy (Conference Grant BCG-44027), the Society for Latin American Studies, the Bristol Institute for Research in the Humanities and Arts, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum and the University of Bristol’s Centre for the Study of Colonial and Postcolonial Societies, its School of Modern Languages and its Faculty of Arts Research Director.

I would like to thank Caroline Williams, David Hook, Rebecca Earle and Rory Miller for their support of the project from the very beginning. Thanks to Sam Barlow, Andrew Redden and Alastair Wilson for their peerless administration which ensured the event ran smoothly. Papers were also given at the conference by Leslie Bethell, Alistair Hennessy, Joseph Smith, Felipe Támeaga Fernández, Michael Costeloe, Paul Garner, Jonathan Curry-Machado, Margarita Díaz-Andreu, Stephen Howe, Adrian Pearce, José María Aguilera Manzano and Luis Fernández Martínez. They all made excellent contributions to the dialogue that informed the revisions of the conference papers into the published chapters of this book. John Darwin, David Brookshaw, Emily Walmsley and Robert Bickers chaired panels and guided our discussions towards comparison with other regions and experiences of empire. I thank David Brown, Natasha Carver, Jo Crow, Lorraine Leu, John MacKenzie, Nicola Miller, Andrew Thompson and Rhiân Williams for their comments on earlier drafts of my Introduction.

Thanks to Nicola Miller and the BLAR Series Editors. It is an honour and a privilege to form the first imprint of this series. Thanks to Rita Matos and Blackwell for their work in making the project a success. I am very grateful to Martín Alonso Roa Celis and the Museo Nacional de Colombia for permission to use their images in the wonderful cover illustrations.

The following abbreviations are used throughout the text:

AGI Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla
HMG His/Her Majesty’s Government
FO Foreign Office Papers
TNA The National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office, Kew)

All translations are by the chapter authors unless otherwise stated.
About the Cover Images
‘Banco de UKarib’
Photomontage
2007

This book’s cover images place nineteenth-century European travellers’ illustrations upon Colombian banknotes from the same period in order to explore the theme of informal empire. The travellers used include Auguste Le Moyne (Untitled image of soldier, 1835) and Jules de Crévaux (‘La bella popula’, published in América pintoresca, 1884). The photomontage explores the multiple physical and cultural presences in America and the Caribbean: aboriginal, black and British imperialist. The title plays upon the conception held by some indigenous groups, in which cannibals are referred to as ‘Caribs’. A ‘Carib’ could be anyone who participated in the slave trade, including
European people, on the basis that the men and women who were deported during the slave trade never returned. Thus they deduce that these people were devoured by the white men in a cannibalistic process. This photomontage is a meditation on the consumption of natural resources, and the increasing economic and cultural integration of the people and lands of the Americas into a world market. It forms part of a wider project to be exhibited later in 2008, and draws on images held in the collections of the Museo Nacional de Colombia.

Martín Alonso Roa Celis, Bogotá, August 2007

Contributor Biographies

Matthew Brown is a Lecturer in Latin American Studies at the University of Bristol.

Malcolm Deas is a Fellow of St. Antony’s College, Oxford, UK.

Jennifer L. French is Assistant Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA.

Louise Guenther has held visiting appointments at the Centre for Brazilian Studies and St Antony’s College at the University of Oxford, UK. She has held MacArthur and Fulbright fellowships, and received her PhD from the University of Minnesota, USA in 1998.

Charles Jones is Reader in International Relations at the University of Cambridge, UK.

Alan Knight is Professor of the History of Latin America at the University of Oxford, UK.

Colin Lewis is Senior Lecturer in Latin American Economic History at the London School of Economics, UK.

Fernanda Peñaloza is a Lecturer in Latin American Cultural Studies at the University of Manchester, UK.

Karen Racine is an Associate Professor of Latin American History at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

David Rock is Professor of Latin American History at the University of California at Santa Barbara, USA.

Andrew Thompson is Professor of Commonwealth and Imperial History at the University of Leeds, UK.
The compromised nature of national sovereignty remains a recurrent feature of political rhetoric in Latin America into the twenty-first century. Radicals, populists and revolutionaries denounce foreign intervention to mobilise support for their causes. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez (2007) repeatedly lambasts the USA's 'imperial agenda' in Latin America. In Mexico, Subcomandante Marcos rails against the way that 'imperialism has changed its mode of attack, but [...] continues its struggle against us' (Marcos, 2007). Multinational businesses such as Coca-Cola and Dunkin' Donuts are the targets of groups seeking to 'resist imperialism' in a variety of ways (Suéscun Pozas, 1998: 540–555). Permanent US military posts in Manta, Ecuador and Comalapa, El Salvador give credence to allegations of a strategic network of covert interventionism across the region (Lindsey-Poland, 2004; Golinger, 2007). Protesters in Cochabamba, Bolivia, lament the unsympathetic and imperialist nature of International Monetary Fund and World Bank prescriptions for economic growth in Latin America (Crabtree, 2005). Even human rights and development organisations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, are accused of infringing national sovereignty in Peru and Colombia (e.g. Conaghan, 2005: 279). These debates and struggles revolve around the extent to which limits should be set on foreign intervention in supposedly sovereign nation-states. When the Argentine footballer-turned-celebrity-radical Diego Maradona protested (2005) about the Free Trade Area of the Americas, calling it an affront to Argentine 'dignity', and resenting that US President George W. Bush came to Buenos Aires to 'treat us like his subjects, because we are not his subjects nor anyone’s subjects', he hit the nail on the head about the cultural underpinnings of informal empire. Such anguished calls for respect and sovereignty make clear the need to address the historical resonances of the contemporary situation, and to interrogate more closely and more analytically the history of 'informal empire' in Latin America. Commerce and capital provide the framework, but it is in the relationships between individuals, and the perceptions of these relationships, where difference and inequality are marked out, and where the asymmetry of power is made explicit, is resisted and is addressed.

Gallagher and Robinson's (1953: 13) assessment that nineteenth-century British policy towards the rest of the world was 'trade with informal control
if possible, trade with rule if necessary”, has long been a central reference point of historical studies of British–Latin American relations. Gallagher and Robinson powerfully described the ‘informal empire’ as the part of the imperial iceberg that was hidden below the water-line (Gallagher and Robinson, 1953: 1), and urged scholars to consider a hypothesis that included ‘informal as well as formal expansion, and [that] must allow for the continuity of the process’. Their work ‘set the agenda for the study of imperial history’ (Cain and Hopkins, 2002 [1993]: 26) for several decades, particularly in the field of British activities in Latin America. Yet now one of the most influential scholars of empire, Ann Stoler (2006a: 136), has dismissed ‘informal empire’ and ‘indirect rule’ as ‘unhelpful euphemisms, not working concepts’. For Stoler informal empire is a euphemism for imperialism, part of a ‘scholarly vocabulary [that] defers to the terms of empires themselves’.

This book sets out to test Stoler’s concerns by means of an interdisciplinary and comparative study of British interactions in Latin America in the conventional age of ‘informal empire’, roughly 1810–1940. If ‘informal empire’ is going to be a ‘working concept’ again, then it will have to be re-defined, re-contextualised, and re-tested. That was the task set for the contributors to this volume, who adopted a range of approaches and methodologies, and who came to divergent conclusions. In this introduction, I provide a working definition of the general concepts in use; I lay out the context of British involvement in Latin America in the nineteenth century in the form of a brief historical narrative for non-specialists; I summarise the historiographies upon which the project builds; and, finally, I suggest how the new studies of the problem presented here can suggest new approaches towards Informal Empire. In his Afterword, Andrew Thompson explores some of the conceptual and comparative conclusions of the analyses featured in the volume, with particular reference to other areas of the British Empire.

Informal Empire: Existing Concepts and New Directions

Gallagher and Robinson’s (1953) hypothesis on the ‘imperialism of free trade’ came to dominate the study of British involvement in Latin America for half a century.1 Launched in the 1950s, it became increasingly contentious

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1 The ‘informal empire’ debate remained largely one that took place in Britain. Spanish historians of Latin America were occupied with other issues. For a discussion of why and how, see Josep Fradera’s comments in an interview with Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, in Schmidt-Nowara and Nieto-Phillips (2006: 160–163). With some exceptions, historians in Latin America found dependency theory more relevant to their own concerns than ‘informal empire’. On the appeal of the ‘dependency’ thesis, and the problems it faced, see Haber (1990: 8–15).
in the 1960s and 1970s as it coincided and sometimes clashed with structuralist and Marxist interpretations of Latin America's dependency on external economies, with Platt (1967, 1968a, 1972) arguing vociferously for the weakness of informal empire in Latin America. As Wm. Roger Louis put it, by 1975 a 'controversy' was raging around the degree of change and continuity that there had been in British policy, and around its practical effects 'on the periphery', an area that included Latin America (Louis, 1976: 235–237; also Jones, 1980). A second stage of debate took place in the 1990s between Thompson (1992) and Hopkins (1994) and was subsequently concluded and wrapped up into surveys and summaries by Miller (1993, 2001) and Knight (1999). The study of Britain's 'informal empire' in Latin America could, therefore, be seen today as a moribund subject to which most scholars are, or should be, indifferent. So why turn to informal empire again? In the next section, I set out three reasons why we should examine the informal empire debate from new perspectives.

The first and most simple reason for returning to informal empire is that the debate left many unsolved questions that still need answering. Eugênio Vargas Garcia's recent historiographical summary focused on the effective political control that Britain exerted over areas of Latin America, looking 'under the orbit' of British power for evidence of influence (2006: 381). It raises several new questions: for example Vargas Garcia is still not quite sure whether Britain actually wanted to exert influence in Latin America, or to what extent metropolitan impulses were effective on the ground. Clearly there is more to be done on these subjects by returning to the existing documentary sources and by expanding the range of materials for study, particularly with evidence from within Latin America itself in addition to the British diplomatic and commercial archives drawn on by earlier studies.

The second reason to turn to informal empire relates to the persistence of the term in academic circles. The debate about whether British–Latin American relations are best characterised as imperial exploitation or mutual advantage has been going on for so long that the concept has managed to remain current despite widespread and repeated critiques. Informal empire has acquired a broadly recognised meaning that can encourage interdisciplinary and comparative dialogue. This meaning, in its simplest form, evokes a powerful nation managing to control a territory over which it does not exercise sovereignty. This makes it a form of imperialism, if we follow Cain and Hopkins's definition that 'the distinguishing feature of imperialism ... is that it involves an incursion, or attempted incursion, into the sovereignty of another state' (Cain and Hopkins, 2002: 54). Yet a broadly understood meaning is not the same as a 'working concept'; to arrive at such an object we need to examine the nature of the incursion and the resultant control that is exercised – be it political, or economic, or cultural,
or military – and the extent to which this control does or does not affect or infringe sovereignty. This means reconfiguring ‘informal empire’. Trends in scholarly research in recent years – particularly but not exclusively post-colonialism and the ‘cultural turn’ – open up new avenues (discussed below) for investigation, comparison and discussion.

The third answer to the question ‘Why informal empire again?’ is that scholars have begun to employ it already in a quite different sense from the conventional usage. Literary scholars and cultural historians have turned to ‘informal empire’ influenced by Said (1978) and Pratt’s (1992) work linking travellers, culture and imperialism. Ricardo Salvatore talks of the USA’s informal empire being built in Latin America between 1890 and 1920 on ‘a collection of diverse discourses, multiple mediators or agents, and, at times, contradictory representations’ (Salvatore, 1998: 70). It is the interdisciplinary recognition of the relevance of culture to discussion of imperial and colonial encounters that explains the recent convergence between British imperial studies and Latin Americanism (e.g. Gallo, 2001b; Fowler, 2004; Aguirre, 2005; Brown, 2006; Ramirez, 2007). This volume hopes to clarify and build upon these developments.

Before we can move down the new, tree-lined and welcoming avenues of culture and comparison, however, it is essential to define our terms. Gallagher and Robinson (1953: 1) recognised this dilemma themselves, observing that the imperial historian was ‘very much at the mercy of his own particular concept of empire’. Or, as A.J.P. Taylor (1976: 197) dismissively put it, ‘nineteenth-century imperialism had many strands, so much so that all the theories about it are true within their terms of reference’. An updated definition of ‘informal empire’ is offered at the end of this introduction; contributors to this volume (in particular Alan Knight) work towards their own, sometimes divergent, definitions.

If ‘informal empire’ is a problematic concept, then the other words in our book’s title also carry their own issues. As Mignolo (2005) has argued, ‘Latin America’ was a nineteenth-century Parisian construct to denote the independent republics who had cast off colonialism, and one that was used by Creole elites to exclude indigenous and Afro-American peoples from their respective nations and publics. Moreover, ‘Latin American Studies’, the discipline within which many of this volume’s contributors make their living, can itself be seen as ‘a kind of cultural neo-colonialism’ (Beverley, 2003: 49). This book itself of course, forming as it does part of a British body of knowledge ‘about Latin America’, including contributions from scholars working at British universities – regardless of their own national origins –, and growing out of a conference paid for by the British Academy and other British societies, can be seen within this tradition.
The meaning of 'culture' has occupied better minds than mine. Here I follow Raymond Williams's tripartite definition: (a) 'the best that has been thought and written in the world'; (b) 'the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded'; and (c) 'a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour' (1961: 57–58). For our purposes of examining informal empire this definition of 'culture' can be summarised as a patchwork of 'values, beliefs, practices and discourses' (Dirks, 1992: 3–5), where those discourses are the linguistic means in which 'ideas organise and regulate social and institutional worlds' (Hall, 2000: 11). In this our understanding of culture follows closely that set out by Gilbert Joseph where culture is 'the symbols and meanings embedded in the daily practices of elite and subaltern (or foreign and local) groups', with culture seen as flexible, processual and 'constantly being refashioned' (Joseph, 1998: 8). As such, this interpretative field builds upon work on travel and 'cultural encounters', and highlights the role of migrants and sojourners in determining the meanings of informal empire. It will quickly become clear to the reader that contributors have their own views on the relative usefulness of 'culture' as an analytical category in assessing informal empire. Some but not all follow Hunt's (1988: 7) hypothesis that 'economic and social relations are not prior to or determining of cultural ones; they are themselves fields of cultural practice and cultural production'.

Commerce and capital should be less problematic terms, constituting as they do the principal means employed towards the gaining of influence in the historiography on British informal empire in Latin America (Lynn, 1999: 101–121). Lord Palmerston indicated that 'it is the business of government to open and secure the roads for the merchant' (Palmerston, 1841: 297), and in this sense commerce and capital were empire's end as well as its means. Capital, as Adelman (1999: 283) has noted, was also central to the construction of states in Latin America. Capital was the bedrock of 'proprietary transformations' and capital interests were 'anything but static' as they sought to 'stabilise market relations through the daily management of conflicts over debts, failed contracts, and the status of money. Private claims over valuable assets – and the ability to enforce them – animated personal interests and shaped what capitalists wanted and expected from public rulers' (Adelman, 1999: 4). As we see in the chapters by Colin Lewis and Charles Jones in this volume, the distinction between 'national' capital and 'foreign' capital was often extremely difficult to discern. A reconfigured 'informal empire' revolving around culture, commerce and capital – roughly correspondent with Adelman's Ideas, Interests and Institutions in which 'none are reducible to the other, but each
is patterned by other fields of social life’ (Adelman, 1999: 4) – can, it is suggested, continue to provide analytical rigour to a popularly understood concept.

Assessing Cultural Encounters

In reconfiguring ‘informal empire’, we draw upon the valuable work on ‘cultural encounters’ or ‘contact zones’ that appears in the work of Pratt, Salvatore and Aguirre. This body of work emerges out of the increasing confluence between the theoretical inspirations of literary and cultural critics, and those of imperial historians. Drawing on these advances, Burton (2003), Hall (2002) and others persuasively argue that in order to ascertain the real nature of imperialism and its consequences, scholars should turn even further away from their previous reliance on metropolitan archives and the ‘imperial mind’, and move towards the often ignored, day-to-day relationships formed between colonised, colonisers and their many mediators. Stoler (2006b: 3) has worked through the ‘tense and tender ties’ of colonialism, arguing that ‘intimate relations’ shape, determine and define colonial relations: ‘these ties are not microcosms of empire but its narrow’. In order to understand colonialism and imperialism, therefore, scholars need to examine the day-to-day experiences of ordinary people, as well as metropolitan laws or the presence of gunboats.

As part of her project of reconfiguring how we understand colonial and imperial relationships – what Cooper (2005: 1) calls ‘unbounding colonialism’ – Stoler has redefined empire itself. She exhorts scholars to ‘identify those gradations of intervention and sovereignty that call themselves by so many nonimperial names’ (Stoler, 2006b: xvi), and argues convincingly for the study of ‘imperial formations ... states of becoming rather than being, macropolities in constant formation’ (Stoler, 2006a: 135–136). If the map painted red to denominate the British Empire was an inaccuracy, then Stoler argues that the entire world should be painted in shades of red, blue and green to reflect the shifting boundaries and composite quality of all imperial formations.\(^2\)

This is persuasive, yet it still leaves us with the difficulty of knowing how to distinguish between different manifestations of ‘imperial formations’. The question of what to call British activity in Latin America in the long nineteenth century remains moot. Indeed, some recent work on the cultural aspects of informal empire can be critiqued on the grounds that

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2 Taking ‘informal empire’ out of the equation can have other consequences, of course; as in Samson (2007) who suggests that “‘formal Empire’ is a strangely narrow definition of British colonialism”.

their definitions are vague or slippery. Salvatore (1998), for example does not define ‘informal empire’ at all and neither does he cite Gallagher and Robinson or make any reference to the British historiography. In contrast, Robert Aguirre does define his term, yet he bases his analysis of British travelling, collecting and writing about nineteenth-century Central America on the premise that ‘informal imperialism’ was a ‘political and economic strategy’ that ‘carved out an area of competitive advantage based largely on trade and economic policy but buttressed strongly by myriad cultural activities on the ground’ (Aguirre, 2005: xv). He argues that ‘cultural forms ... – travel narratives, museum exhibitions, panoramas, diplomatic correspondence, ethnological freakshows, and adventure novels – lent crucial ideological support to the work of informal imperialism, shaping an audience receptive to the influx of British power in the region’ (Aguirre, 2005: xvi). All of which presupposes that ‘informal imperialism’ was a policy – which has been vigorously disputed by many critics, including Charles Jones in this volume – and that informal empire was a reality on the ground across Latin America – a contention rejected by many of the contributors to this book. The supposition that cultural forms ‘buttressed’ political and economic strategy, and ‘supported’ the work of informal imperialism, seems rooted in rather conventional interpretations of ‘informal empire’. The continent’s political independence in the nineteenth century is widely agreed to have been compromised by the influence of more powerful regions. But did the apparently omnipresent threat of direct intervention constitute ‘imperialism’? Was the widespread cultural respect, if not veneration, for Great Britain, part of a ‘neo-colonial’ mindset? To what extent does the concept of ‘informal empire’ capture the relationships that existed between Britain and various Latin American countries?

Reconfiguring Informal Empire

This book arose out of my attempt to understand the nature of British involvement in nineteenth-century Latin America. It initially seemed to me that ‘informal empire’ was too strong a term to describe the particular situation that I was studying – the involvement of around 7,000 British and Irish adventurers in the independence of Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador (Brown, 2006). These adventurers were variously too headstrong, too incompetent, or too inebriated to be accused of operating on anyone’s instructions, let alone forming part of a coherent imperial project directed from London. Further consideration of the literature on informal empire suggested, however, that this might be an apt description of the way that informal empire worked in Latin America, where its ‘agents’, if we can call them that, were neither committed to the cause nor interested in promoting its values, yet
were often perceived as imperialists by the locals they encountered, and in some way, therefore, their decisions and actions did shape society in the lands where they lived. The gap between the production of British policy, and the reception (or not) of practices ‘on the ground’, meant that it was hard to reconcile even with ‘absent-minded’ imperialism, following Rivière (1995) and Porter (2004b), or empire by accident or improvisation.

Bringing scholars together to address the subject both conceptually and comparatively seemed the best way to get closer to an answer to the question. We aimed to get a broad view of how ‘informal empire’ worked, with contributors on the most commonly identified areas of strong British influence – Brazil and the River Plate – as well as less obvious regions, such as Colombia and Patagonia. The discussion was explicitly interdisciplinary, including several scholars trained or influenced by Robinson and Gallagher themselves, but also a younger generation of researchers who feel that they owe more to postcolonialism and subaltern studies. One result is a clearer picture of the gradations and varieties of informal empire across the region, emphasising that these were largely determined by local conditions and mores. We hoped to build on the work on US–Latin American relations that cast foreign-local encounters ‘as complex affairs involving multiple agents, elaborate cultural constructs and unforeseen outcomes’ (Coronil, 1998: ix). We wanted to prove the validity of Stephen Howe’s claim that ‘studies of culture, discourse and worldview, of indigenous resistance and adaptation, can happily and creatively co-exist with work on colonial high politics or political economy, (Howe, 2001: 135).

The result of our encounter, which took place during two cold, windy and wintry days in Bristol, is this book, and it represents a resounding vote in favour of retaining and clarifying ‘informal empire’ as an analytical tool.

The Rise of British Informal Empire in Latin America

British involvement in Latin America has its roots in the adventures, lootings and ‘discoveries’ of Walter Ralegh and then Francis Drake – imperialists and pirates who sought to extract gold and riches from the Spanish empire during the long colonial period when it was often supposed, though not entirely accurately, that Spain had closed the doors of its empires to other Europeans (O’Phelan Godoy, 2002; Herzog, 2003).

This book focuses on the long nineteenth century, yet the decline and fall of British informal empire in Latin America could be convincingly presented as spanning a much longer period, from 1762 to 1965. This longue durée begins with what might be cast as episodes of formal imperialism – the successful occupation by British forces of Havana and Manila (1762–1763) in the Seven Years War. On these occasions, and later in 1806–1807 when British forces led
by Sir Home Popham occupied Buenos Aires and Montevideo, geopolitics and local resistance dictated that the British abandon formal imperial involvement within a year. Elsewhere, the British continued to occupy and collect formal colonies in Latin America, over which Great Britain exercised formal sovereignty. Trinidad was taken from Spain in 1797, the Malvinas/Falklands were occupied in 1833, British Guiana was expanded territorially (at the expense of Venezuela) through the explorations of the Schomburgk expedition in 1840, and British Honduras (today Belize) was formally established through treaty negotiation with Guatemala in 1859.

British commercial involvement in Latin America was on the rise even in the eighteenth century. Adrian Pearce has shown how British penetration of neutral trade, and the contracts signed with Spain before Independence, reveal considerable British dominance of external trade and much political influence well before Napoleon Bonaparte’s decapitation of the Spanish Empire in 1808 (Pearce, 2007). During the Independence period, the Spanish American rebels consistently appealed for British support, dedicating great efforts to securing British recognition of their independence from Spain, with emissaries living and lobbying in London (Racine, 1996). In turn, Britain sent merchants, diplomats, commissioners and consuls – as well as mercenaries, adventurers and chancers – who lived in South America and represented their country’s interests (Brown, 2006). These permanent and temporary migrants represented a mixture of British commerce, capital and culture. Later it was the indentured labourers who travelled from the Asian colonies to work in Peruvian guano and other industries, who linked formal to informal empire (Northrup, 1995).

After Independence, and with Spanish influence in the former colonies waning and often completely rejected by new nation-builders, informal empire could grow in strength in areas where the legitimacy of popular sovereignty constructed around new ‘nation-states’ was often weak. British recognition of Independence in the 1820s was the ‘highpoint’ (Smith, 1978: 7) of British informal political influence in Latin America, where the treaties of recognition were specifically designed with British interests in mind, such as the prohibition of the slave trade and guarantees of beneficial British trading rights. As Nicola Miller has summarised, Latin America’s relatively ‘early decolonisation [in comparison with other world regions] result[ed] in a lengthy experience of formal political sovereignty being compromised by economic dependence’ (Miller, 1999: 3). Yet until the 1860s, the volume of Britain’s trade with Latin America remained relatively low. ‘Official’ British interest in the region, for what it was worth, was strategic rather than commercial in a region that was still felt to be ‘far away and [that] lacked political or strategic importance’; indeed ‘the over-riding aim of British foreign policy in the nineteenth century was the preservation of an ill-defined and vague
status quo throughout the world’ (Smith, 1978: 3). British power revolved around naval bases and coaling stations, such as the Falklands/Malvinas, which became what Lord Curzon referred to as the ‘tollgates and barbicans’ of empire. These colonies, growing out of an original strategic function, then became the ‘bridgeheads of trade’ (Darwin, 1997) into the informal empire as the nineteenth century progressed.

With the technological innovations of this period – the telegraph, the transatlantic steam ship, and the railway – importing and exporting to and from Latin America became less burdensome. The 1870s and 1880s saw trade between Britain and Latin America boom, as the latter became fully incorporated into the Atlantic economy, principally in the subordinate position of an exporter of raw materials to the industrialising powers of Europe and North America (O’Rourke and Williamson, 1999). In the view of many scholars, it was in this period that British interest, influence and commerce combined to make informal empire a reality in many areas of Latin America until the First World War. At this time, therefore, ‘Britain still exercised considerable sway over much of Latin America’ through the ‘competitive weight of its inexpensive manufactures, abundant capital and ubiquitous navy’ (Kennedy, 2002: 17). The ‘imperial fabric’ was ‘held together by an almost invisible web of connecting forces and influences, of which the Royal Navy was one of the most important’ (Gough, 1999: 80). Yet even then, ‘British’ power was variant along its own national or regional lines – as work on the Welsh in Patagonia, the Scottish in Venezuela or the Irish in Brazil and Argentina has shown (Rheinheimer, 1988; Williams, 1991; Murray, 2004; Marshall, 2005).

The Fall of British Informal Empire in Latin America

From its height in the 1890s–1910s, concentrated primarily in the Atlantic seabords of Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, British informal empire faltered at differing rates according to the type of influence being exerted. The strategic dimension to British imperialism in Latin America had already begun to diminish after 1850, as other areas of the world assumed more problematic and more pressing characters (Vargas García, 2006: 377). In that year, the Clayton–Bulwer Treaty represented a political accommodation with the USA over Central America, which was a ‘step in Britain’s political disengagement from Latin America’ (Smith, 1978: 23). In 1869, the opening of the Suez Canal cut the journey time from South-east Asia to Northern Europe by two-thirds. For Great Britain, the Western hemisphere suddenly seemed a lot further away, in comparison to the apparently increased proximity of its Eastern Colonies. British lobbying on the construction of a canal in Panama – part of Colombia until 1903 – continued but was superseded in this period by French and then US projects.
In terms of economics, the Barings collapse of 1890, discussed in David Rock’s chapter, had more effect on Argentina than it did on Great Britain, and revealed the markedly different weights of informal empire on centre and periphery. As Colin Lewis shows in his contribution to this volume, the role of British capital in Argentina’s continuing ‘weak institutionality’ and ‘incomplete capitalist modernisation’ by the late nineteenth century ‘remains a matter of debate’. But while British influence on Argentine economic policy may have decreased, the actual volume and profits of trade and investment actually continued to increase. The First World War was a period of increased competition over scarce resources for the ‘great powers’ in Latin America (Dehne, 2005).

By the late nineteenth century, British diplomatic influence on Latin American politics was also on the wane. British diplomats in Brazil and elsewhere realised that they had little tangible to offer beyond vague threats and promises (Smith, 1979). This often led to frustration and helplessness on the part of diplomats who had specifically chosen to serve in out-of-the-way stations where they hoped and expected to enjoy a relatively high social status and freedom from undue worry regarding the protection of British interests. By the early twentieth century, British officials in Latin America ‘demonstrated neither the will nor did they possess the means to bring about a Latin America resolving around a British orbit’ (Smith, 1978: 24).

The decline in political influence was accelerated during and after the First World War, after which the USA replaced Great Britain as the hegemonic power in Latin America. In the inter-war period, Britain’s economy declined, the US economy surged and Latin American nationalism started to affect its external commercial relations to a greater extent. After 1914, modernity and the liberal model of trade were ever less frequently linked to Great Britain in the minds of Latin American elites. The Second World War is often held to mark the end of British interest in Latin America, with the nationalisation of the British-owned railways in Argentina marking the end of a long period of interest and influence. Nevertheless, this is not to say that British influence in Latin America ended in the 1940s. Indeed, in many ways the decline in ‘informal empire’ and British control in the inter-war period took place at the very same time at which British trade was at its highpoint. In the 1930s, British trade and influence in Argentina remained considerable. Rory Miller (2006) has argued that British economic activity continued to be vigorous, flexible and voluminous in the two decades after the Second World War. There were more ‘joint ventures’ with local firms, merchant houses remained active and investment in the booming oil industry provided generous profits. But after 1945, this British involvement was part of a general pattern of European investment, ‘of which Britain was an important but not dominant part’ (Miller, 2006).
The supposed 'fall' of British informal empire must also be qualified by recognition of the existence of multiple competing imperial and national projects against which it was pitted. In the period discussed above, Latin America never formed part of a hegemonic 'informal empire', but rather it existed in the shadow of several empires. The 'close encounters' (Joseph, LeGrand and Salvatore, 1998) of US–Latin American relations began in 1823 when President James Monroe issued his famous doctrine warning Great Britain, Russia and other European powers that 'the American continents ... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers' (Monroe, 1823). It moved on through such well-known incursions as the United Fruit Company enclaves and CIA support of coups and civil war (Joseph, LeGrand and Salvatore, 1998). German, Italian and other European influences were also strong during the period of British dominance. This was regionally varied and locally moderated, of course, but strong in areas as diverse as opera, car-manufacturing, tango and aviation (Archetti, 1999: 3–7; Dávila and Miller, 1999: 13–16; McBeth, 2001; Aguilar, 2003; Hiatt, 2007: 335–338). In his contribution to this volume, Alan Knight suggests that the cultural influence of Italians in Argentina was much greater than that of Britons.

Britain's cultural influence in Latin America was heavily circumscribed by other more resonant traditions. The principal external cultural references in nineteenth-century Latin America came from France, not Britain or the USA. The 1789 and 1830 French Revolutions were an aspiration or warning to Latin American elites; the writings of Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu were the required reading of those who imagined themselves to be Enlightened nation-builders. The canonical text for Latin American continental identity, José Enrique Rodó's Ariel (1900), was inspired more by Ernest Renan's work on the dichotomy between Caliban and Ariel than it was by Shakespeare's The Tempest. Rodó's Ariel warned against the encroaching power of the utilitarian and materialistic USA – by 1900, for Rodó, Britain's power was not even worth warning against.

Spain retained a residual influence in Hispanic America in the nineteenth century, as did Portugal in Brazil. Most Spanish attention became focused on the metropole's internal crisis, and then on a reorganised and strengthened colonial settlement in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines (Fontana, 1979, Fradera, 2005). In Hispanic America an initial wave of revulsion for things Spanish, taken up by some of the most fervent rebels in the Independence period, was replaced by a more tolerant regard for hispanismo and expressions of gratitude for the Spanish language and Hispanic culture. The work of Andrés Bello on grammar and culture was but the most notable example (Jaksic, 2001). Later in the nineteenth century, hispanidad became an ideology to be exported by Spain to its former colonies in a fashion that
Hennessy (2000) has suggested calling ‘surrogate imperialism’, with references to the proposals of the Spanish writer Ramiro de Maetzu in the promotion of hispanidad.

Competition and cooperation between rival powers meant that any empire in Latin America had to operate with incomplete, contested and improvised authority. In this context, it is useful to note Frederick Cooper’s thoughts about ‘layered’ colonialism. Cooper uses the example of late-nineteenth-century Sudan, ‘which was colonised by Egypt, which was part of the Ottoman Empire but itself experienced heavy British intervention’ (Cooper, 2005: 11). Late-nineteenth-century Panama, early-twentieth-century Argentina or mid-nineteenth-century Mexico would be similar Latin American examples where rival imperial projects competed with, and sometimes defeated, the nation-building and state-building efforts of local elites. The expeditions of archaeologists to Latin America revealed these rivalries, where French, German, US and British researchers vied with each other for the best ‘discoveries’ and for the best local staff, translators and guides (Díaz-Andreu, 2008; although for an interpretation stressing cooperation over competition, see Botero, 2007). These imperial projects sometimes employed the threat of outright force – gunboat diplomacy or invasion, as used by Britain, Germany and France in Colombia, Venezuela and Mexico respectively – and sometimes used culture and ideas. Together they show that ‘informal empire’ was continually contested by other foreign powers.

The narrative of British and other foreign influences provided above, however, forms no more than one side of the story. It privileges the role of external actors as agents of change in Latin America, and neglects the variety of external as well as internal references that shaped Latin American societies. Nation-building, state-building, cultural production and economic activity in Latin America were local processes that drew on external examples and influences, to be sure, but which were primarily founded upon local and national necessities and reactions to local circumstances. It is easy, but inaccurate, to call the period ‘neocolonial’ (Pratt, 1992: 147), which implies that Latin America’s relationship with Britain was colonial in all but name. Such a term precludes the many ambiguities of power relationships that form the crux of all imperial and geopolitical relationships. As Simón Bolívar noted in 1830, writing just a month before his death, Latin America’s problems were largely internal, meaning that ‘once we’ve been eaten alive by every crime and extinguished by ferocity, the Europeans won’t even bother to conquer us’ (Bolívar, 1830: 146). Latin American leaders such as Bernardino Rivadavia perceived a difference between the British people and the British government, and tailored their strategies accordingly (Rivadavia, 1817: 17). Latin Americans perceived British ‘informal empire’ in ways that were starkly different to how it looked from Whitehall, and how it was presented in adventure stories or travel
memoirs (Forman, 2000b). Savvy leaders often used the threat of foreign intervention as an opportunity for rhetorical pronouncements on national sovereignty. Cipriano Castro’s famous declaration, in response to the unsubtle gunboat diplomacy of Great Britain and Germany, that ‘the insolent foreigner’s footprint has profaned the nation’s sacred soil’ (Castro, 1902), was as much designed to re-enforce his own precarious hold on power by emphasizing his role as the saviour of the sacred national soil, as it was to warn the foreign power away from a sovereign state (McBeth, 2001). As Andrew Thompson shows in his Afterword to this volume, the rhetoric of infringed sovereignty became a key element of nationalist discourse in later nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin America.

Filling the Latin-America-Shaped-Hole in British Imperial Historiography

The discussion, above, of the historiographical trends in British Imperial History and in Latin American Studies, suggest a growing convergence of thematic interests coupled with a divergence of methodological approaches. This volume attempts to take advantage of the former and to overcome the latter. It is worth remembering that Gallagher and Robinson (with Denny, 1961) wrote on Latin America before the Parry Report (1965) encouraged a generation of historians of Latin America in the UK away from British imperial history and into Area Studies. This was in many ways a good thing. The work of Abel and Lewis (1985), Miller (1993), McFarlane (1994) and others laid much more emphasis on ‘Latin America’s external connection’ than on Britain’s expansion into Latin America and, consequently, their work became increasingly divorced from interpretations of British imperialism (e.g. Cain and Hopkins, 2002: 4–5) that retained a British narrative over the Peruvian, Mexican and Uruguayan particularities. On the other side of the disciplinary fence, the Latin American experience remains absent from the colonial studies literature associated with Stoler, Burton and Cooper that emphasises the importance of focusing on the gritty details of colonialism and the more ‘nebulous aspects’ of imperialism. They ‘blur the boundaries’ of the paradigms of the discipline of imperial history (Ward, 2003: 47), but Latin America remains absent from the grand narrative.

The blurring of boundaries has been coupled with a corresponding movement away from methodological homogeneity, and much consequent disagreement over approaches and terminology. In this volume alone, some contributors use the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’; others talk of Foucaultian power dynamics. Some commentators at the conference, most notably Stephen Howe, suggested that ‘semi-colonialism’ might be a more useful way of thinking about Latin America’s relationship with Britain in the
nineteenth century. Gott (2007) draws on the work of Quijano (2001) on colonialidad or coloniality, where societies retain or assume the characteristics of colonialism, even when they have become nominally independent. The chapters that follow are explicitly diverse in their subject matter and in their methodologies. All, however, take a comparative approach that acknowledges the divergent manifestations of 'informal empire' across Latin America and across the globe; and all take an interest in the meanings and consequences of this coloniality, or neocolonial attitude, towards a diverse range of European cultures. Contributors are united by their efforts to relate 'informal empire' to other terms of analysis.

The present volume seconds Gott's call for comparison (Gott, 2007: 270), and follows Richard Price's plea for imperial historians to look beyond the 'British World' or the 'British Atlantic' and into more complicated waters of the 'fragilities of empire' (Price, 2006: 612). It adheres to John Darwin's view of 'the British world-system' as a 'cumbrous amalgam of empires formal and informal' (Darwin, forthcoming), and it stresses the connectedness of the nineteenth-century world, with social, political and commercial networks stretching across national and imperial boundaries. As such, it is a meeting between British 'imperial history' and Latin American Studies, even though it is debatable how many of the contributors would choose to position themselves in the former rather than the latter camp. The book takes a 'broad-angled and eclectic vision' and tries to be 'sensitive to and willing to investigate the manifold, often paradoxical connections that have operated between different territories and peoples over time, and acknowledge as well the full diversity of power systems and actors involved' (Colley, 2002a: 144, 134). It accepts Catherine Hall's observation that 'different colonial projects give access to different meanings of empire. The [British] empire changed across time ... each [manifestation] with the different preoccupations of those specific temporalities, places and spaces' (Hall, 2002: 15). One measure of the success (or otherwise) of this volume will be if it contributes to the mapping of the changes that occurred in British imperialism when it encountered Latin America.

Another measure of success, though perhaps a more idealistic one, would be if scholars of British Empire began to take more than token notice of Latin America. At present, much of the best work on Britain's nineteenth century is dismissive, ignorant or inaccurate about Britons' involvement in Latin America. Perhaps this is a result of the historic 'insularity' and 'political and methodological conservatism' of the historiography of British imperialism (Kennedy, 1996: 345). Perhaps it is more simply a problem of linguistic ability, with scholars of British imperialism lacking the language skills to engage with documents in Spanish and Portuguese; as Aguirre observes, a variety of factors have coincided to 'skew our understanding of British imperialism