

Why we share a different history

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OLD WORLD, NEW WORLD. The story of Britain and America. By Kathleen Burk.

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Histories of the links between Britain and America tend to fall into two broad types, the relay race and the country dance. In the relay race, the United States succeeds the United Kingdom as prime vector of the Anglo-Saxon attitudes summed up in the title of the latest American work in this vein, Walter Russell Mead's *God and Gold: Britain, America, and the making of the modern world*

(2007). In the country dance, the two nations entwine, move apart and embrace again, always within some constraints but without any obvious destination. Both types of history portray what is for ever doomed to be called "the special relationship", but one stresses what's special while the other fastens on the relationship.

Kathleen Burk's *Old World, New World: The story of Britain and America* describes a dance not a race. Her opening question - "Why is the Anglo American relationship different from those (sic) of any two other countries?" - might suggest otherwise. US- Chinese relations, say, are obviously unlike those between Britain and France; then why single out Anglo-American links unless the explanation will be something like what Mead calls "the golden meme" that shaped an increasingly triumphant "world of the Wasps"? Burk's ambitious narrative suggests two more plausible answers. First, because the United States emerged from the British Empire, with all the legacies that entailed, and, second, because each country has never succeeded in escaping the other's clinch, no matter how many other partners they have dallied with over the centuries: "different from each other as they were . . . they were, nevertheless, more alike than any other two powers on the globe".

Old World, New World runs from Plato to NATO, and from the Cold War to the Iraq War. Most such histories begin where American origin myths also start: either in 1607 at Jamestown or in 1620, with the Pilgrims. Burk opens with Plato's myth of Atlantis, before traversing the prehistory of English activity in the Atlantic and confidently surveying the settlement of the mainland colonies before the Seven Years War. At moments, she looks set to espouse a myth more enduring even than Plato's: "Fundamentally, the New World would allow freedom, and the chance for new beginnings". Yet new beginnings did not immediately bring freedom for the estimated 75 per cent of white British and Irish migrants who were transported westwards before 1800 in chains or indentures. They were also quite distinct for the enslaved Africans who made up almost 70 per cent of those who in the same period crossed the Atlantic to British America, including the West Indies.

The Caribbean plays no part in Burk's narrative, which for almost its first third is the just-so story of the birth of the United States rather than a history of Britain in the Americas. She also overlooks the Spanish, Dutch, French and Russian origins of such states as Florida, Texas, California, New York, Louisiana and Alaska. In fact, like every major history of Anglo American relations, from Thomas Jefferson's *Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774) to Andrew Roberts's *History of the English-Speaking Peoples since 1900* (2006), Old

World, New World treats the monoculture implied by “Anglo-” rather than the multicultural polity encompassed by “American”. Who would dare to undertake a transatlantic history joining the bewildering variety of America’s fifty states to the lingering complexities of Britain and Ireland’s four nations? Safer, by far, to concentrate on the political history of the white Anglo-American elites, as Burk does for the bulk of her book.

Burk’s story is not an uplifting tale of the English-speaking peoples’ onward march to destiny after the late unpleasantness of the American Revolution. She amply describes “nearly a century of unfriendly and sometimes threatening relations” that followed Independence, and even overbalances her narrative at times to highlight dissension, as when she devotes more space to the 1895-6 Venezuelan boundary dispute - “truly a turning point” - than to the whole of the First World War. From that crux, Burk relates how Britain gradually ceded hemispheric hegemony in the Americas to the US, then financial supremacy, and finally global dominance after 1945. She shows in rich detail how American policymakers engineered this shift, and why their British counterparts acquiesced in it. Yet this was no passing of the baton of metaphysical Anglo Saxonism: Woodrow Wilson had scotched that idea in 1918 when he warned an audience at Buckingham Palace, “You must not speak of us who come over here as cousins, still less as brothers; we are neither. Neither must you think of us as Anglo-Saxons, for that term can no longer be rightly applied to the people of the United States”. It was instead a coolly negotiated British retreat. The withdrawal was long drawn out: Britain repaid the last \$100 million instalment of its wartime Lend-Lease loan only in December 2006. By then, the Anglo American elites had weathered the Suez crisis, divisions over the Vietnam War and nuclear defence, the Yom Kippur War and the Falklands War, and were already mired in the second Gulf War. As the former British ambassador in Washington Sir Christopher Meyer put it in the run-up to that war: “There comes a point where, if you hug too close, it becomes an end in itself”. His verdict foreshadows Burk’s own chastening conclusion: “there is a true love hate Anglo-American special relationship”.

Burk enlivens her grand narrative with three interludes of cultural history.

“Nineteenth-Century Travellers’ Tales” mostly describes Britons’ shock, awe and occasional contempt for the young Republic’s ruggedly democratic population, “these children of our own”, as Anthony Trollope condescendingly called them. A second is an omnium gatherum deftly covering “everyday life” from the early nineteenth century to the present, from emigration and exports to Masterpiece Theatre and MTV, by way of abolitionism, women’s suffrage and the New Deal. And “Anglo-American Marital Relations: 1870-1945” treats the “gilded prostitution” that joined the transatlantic aristocracies of land and trade, as well as the less glamorous, but often no less romantically disappointing, liaisons between American GIs and their British brides. These chapters are only loosely linked to the political and economic story they adorn. Burk leaves to others the task of combining attitudes and policies, culture and politics, into a satisfyingly integrated Anglo-American whole.

Old World, New World is still the most reliable, lucidly narrated and generous history of the mutual entanglement of Britain and America we are likely to have for some time. It is a story of two worlds, but they are mostly those of Washington and Westminster. However, for most of Burk’s story, the world Britain and America inhabited was one of empires. It was no coincidence that when, in 1943, Harold Macmillan compared the British to the Greeks in the Roman Empire - “We must run Allied Forces Headquarters as the Greek slaves ran the operations of the Emperor Claudius” - he was Minister Resident in Algiers. Nor should we forget that when Winston Churchill spoke in 1946 of “a special relationship”, the old imperialist specified one not between the UK and the US but “between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States”. The next great synthesis of Anglo-American relations will have to depict that relationship less as a dance of two countries than as a race between empires.