

# The Steamship *Great Britain* and British Emigration

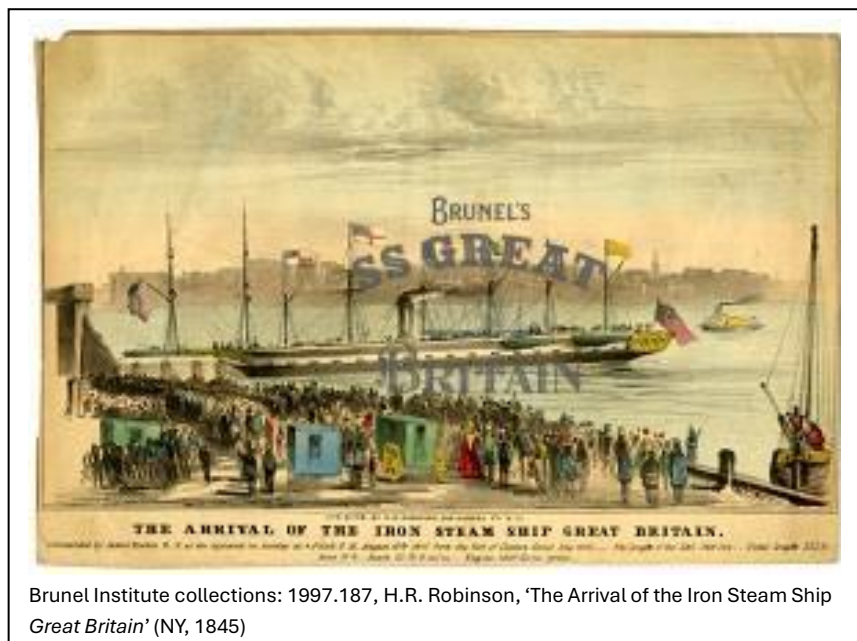
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## Abstract:

This is a transcript of a public lecture given at the Brunel Institute on the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 2025.

In the nineteenth century, steam power revolutionised transport upon the ocean. Britons spilled out on the seas in unprecedented numbers. This lecture explores some of the motives and ideologies driving British emigration. It describes the broader context in which the career of the steamship *Great Britain* played out; the wider world into which she was floated out. It touches on the impact of the emigrant passage itself, considers how migrant experiences varied, and asks whether a larger, “Greater Britain” emerged as a result.

In July 1845, two years after she was floated out of her dock, SS *Great Britain* completed her first voyage – across the Atlantic, destination: New York (just 45 passengers aboard). Today we often associate *Great Britain* with emigration to Australia, but it was with Atlantic crossings in mind that the order for our ship was placed in the first place. The Great Western Steam Ship Co. of Bristol had established the first Atlantic steamship line with the *Great Western* in 1838; *Great Britain* was intended, firstly, to increase the frequency of sailings, and crucially to guarantee the regularity of service so attractive to would-be passengers.



Brunel Institute collections: 1997.187, H.R. Robinson, 'The Arrival of the Iron Steam Ship *Great Britain*' (NY, 1845)

So it is to New York that I want to take us first this evening. But I want to start not with a symbol of Britannia triumphant – of our gigantic steamship dominating New York

harbour, a “monster of the deep, a sort of mastodon of this age”, as the *New York Herald* put it – but with an altogether more downbeat image, of the British in retreat.

On the afternoon of November 25th, 1783, General George Washington led the men of his Continental Army into New York City, the last holdout of the British Army in its American colonies. At the same time, the final British troops were boarding their longboats and heading to the transports awaiting them in the harbour. There were small acts of defiance. One British warship allegedly fired a shot at jeering American crowds on the shore of Staten Island, but the cannonball fell harmlessly into the water. In Battery Park on the southern tip of Manhattan, the Union flag had been nailed to the top of a flagpole, and the flagpole greased in the hope of keeping it there. But before the British fleet were even out of the harbour, the pole had been climbed, the flag torn down, and the stars and stripes flew over the Hudson River. November the 25th became known, in the New York area, as Evacuation Day - Britain's first great settler empire, the Thirteen Colonies, had come to an end.

This had been an empire of conquest and commerce, but also, significantly, one of migration. Britain's north American colonies had been characterised by their thirst for labour: their resources to be exploited, plantation goods to be grown, land made available (through treaty, disease, and by force) to be settled and farmed. Such a place would take in labour in all its forms, from free migration, on the one hand, to slavery, on the other, and indentured servitude somewhere in between. That system of indentured servitude had been deliberately designed to stimulate migration to the colonies from overcrowded urban and poor rural settings in the British Isles, and in the process to bind the colonies ever closer to Britain. Between 1630 and 1780, more than 50% of the labour force streaming into Britain's Atlantic possessions - the Thirteen Colonies, the Caribbean colonies, Canada – came as servants, many bound to four or five years of service after their arrival. Convicts were transported to the Thirteen Colonies, too, long before they were brought to Australia – indeed, long before James Cook had even set eyes on Australia – with about 50,000 convicts landed in colonial America by the outbreak of the Revolution. If you include white indentured servants alongside the black enslaved population, then during the eighteenth century more than 75% of all immigrants to the Thirteen Colonies arrived in some form of bondage. I don't say this to draw a false equivalence between servitude and slavery, but rather to underscore just how labour-hungry these Colonies were and America would remain across the rest of the nineteenth century. In 1850, the year *Great Britain* was purchased by the Gibbs, Bright Company of Liverpool, 230,000 people left the British Isles for the United States. By comparison, just 33,000 went to Canada, and 16,000 to Australia.

The outbreak of the Revolutionary War checked British migration for period, and when it resumed, it did so in force: if anything, British migration would be even more a feature of the nineteenth century than it had been of the eighteenth. It exploded in the period between 1760 and 1914, and while there were many shifts in the types of emigrant, the

patterns of movement, and the destinations of choice across this period (to say nothing of the varied experiences of different regions of the British Isles, and class, and individuals) the figures are astonishing: perhaps as many as 22 million people left the British Isles between 1815 and 1914.



*SS Great Britain*, then, was launched into a world on the move – and a world with relatively few restrictions on human movement. It's important to remember just how historically contingent this was, and doing so helps us to see more clearly not just the array of tools that states possess today to filter, deflect, and even shut off human

mobility (something we all saw during the Covid pandemic), but also the forms of de-globalisation that have developed in recent decades. The mid-nineteenth century was, in many ways, a different world. British emigrants at this time were not simply embarking on one-way trips to America or other settler lands; return migration was also a key phenomenon of the period. One estimate has it that between a quarter and a third of all British emigrants in the nineteenth century returned home. There was also the phenomenon of chain migration – of people moving between dispersed locations over their lifetimes, but often in response to the development of similar and related resource frontiers – pursuing new mining opportunities, for example. Whatever form migration took, it was always important in the transmission of ideas, customs, and a sense of belonging around the world.

So how are we to make sense of this vast complex phenomenon? (And how am I going to do it in less than an hour?). Let me first address a few deceptively simple questions. Who went? Why did they go? How were their voyages organised, and what destinations were attractive? I'll then spend a bit of time talking about Australia's nineteenth century; emigration to which formed the second phase of *SS Great Britain's* career, carrying up to 750 passengers at a time for the Gibbs, Bright Company of Liverpool – first in 1852, and then in a sustained period of runs between 1859 and 1876. I'll end tonight with reflecting on a few themes in the study of British emigration that have most interested recent historians.

## I Passengers

Even as the British fleet was setting sail from New York harbour and the Thirteen Colonies were no more, there were hopes that a new settler empire of loyalism might rise from the ruins of the old. Plenty of North American colonists had remained loyal to the Crown, and about 60,000 chose to follow the departing troops and start again in a different part of the British Empire. Some went to the West Indies, to India, or to Australia, but most went north into what remained of British North America – the Canadas, where a new, non-French speaking population would take root along the St Lawrence River, generating frictions that would require resolution later in the century. Most of these Loyalists came from New York and Pennsylvania; many, too, became increasingly frustrated with British colonial authorities who seemed disinterested in their fate. Nonetheless, they were increasingly assimilated into the British empire as the nineteenth century progressed.

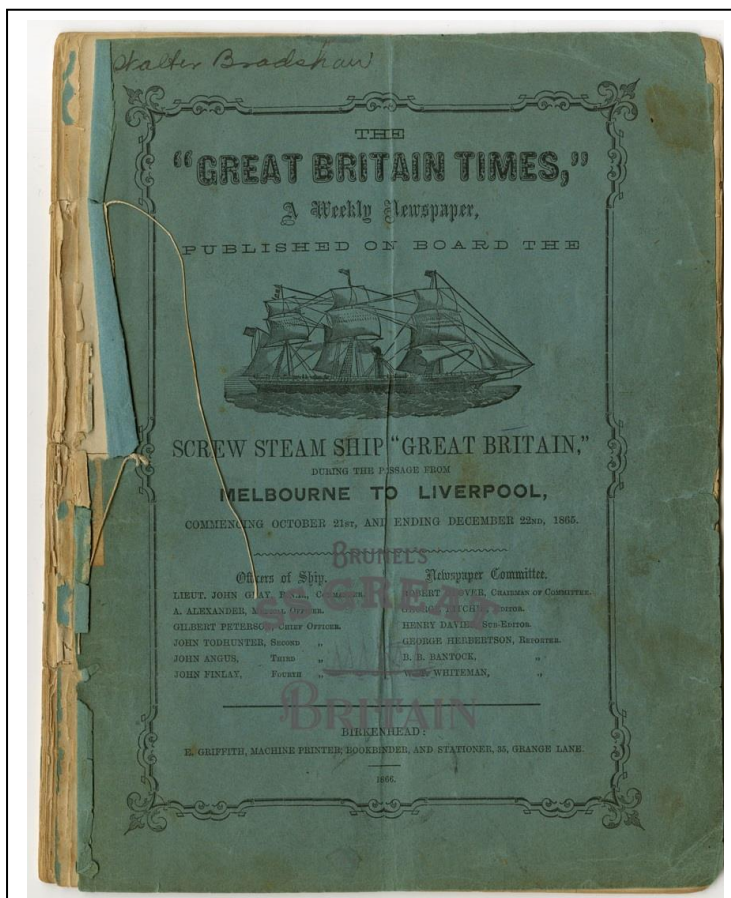
In Britain itself the loss of the Thirteen Colonies had done little to dampen enthusiasm for emigration as an idea – even if this was not always backed up with government action. With the end of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in 1815, fears about the impact of the return of large numbers of idle soldiers raised awareness of emigration as a form of social reform. Its propagandists set to work, finding fertile ground in the economic slump that accompanied the war's end, as unemployment rose, wages fell, and poverty soared. We often think of deprivation as an urban problem (and indeed growing numbers of British emigrants to the United States had urban backgrounds as the century progressed), but rural poverty was an important driver of British emigration too in this period. In 1818, more than 80% of the total sum available to English parishes was being spent on poor relief. Patrick Colquhoun, a Scottish merchant who had made money transporting convicts to Maryland, was one of many prominent advocates of sponsoring emigration to send unwanted populations overseas, develop new markets for British goods, and thus, in his eyes, doubly improve life at home.

There's some evidence of state-assisted emigration schemes coming into force in the years immediately following 1815. Relatively few people took advantage of them – perhaps just 11,000 at that time – but they had a wider significance to the governments of Britain's remaining colonies in promoting the virtues of emigration. Four thousand settlers were sent to the Ottawa valley 1815-1821 to create a 'loyalist' bulwark against potential American expansion; another four thousand were sent to the Cape of Good Hope to shore up the British community around this vital strategic base. But these schemes also revealed regional tensions around emigration even within the British Isles. Many in Scotland, in particular, were worried about excessive emigration to the British colonies – that it was stripping the Highlands of people. Others feared that it was

removing unattached male populations that might normally be recruited into the British Army: for Scottish nobles, in particular, the ability to raise large numbers of these troops was an important part of their function and source of their authority within the Union. Henry Dundas might stand as a symbol of this anti-emigration lobby. In 1803 he had introduced the Passenger Act to try and restrict emigration, which he saw as a manpower drain flowing out of the British Isles, a waste. Ulstermen also worried about drain of Protestants to the New World: would they in time be swamped by Irish Catholics?

Some of these objections were legitimate; some, mere paranoia, but in general they were brushed aside by the economic pressures favouring emigration, and by government visions of future disorder unless pressures were eased at home. This idea drove one of the most advocates of state-assisted emigration in the nineteenth century, Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Wakefield (1796-1862) viewed emigration both as a safety value to relieve overcrowding in Britain and as a tool of social engineering in the new societies Britons would build – nowhere more so than in his idealised colonies of South Australia and New Zealand in the 1830s.

The making of the model colonist began aboard. As historian Helen Doe has shown, one of the ways in which order was maintained on emigrant ships, especially with the



Brunel Institute collections: 1997.031, E. Griffith, "The Great Britain Times": a Weekly Newspaper' (1866)

increased numbers of third-class passengers, was with the appointment of matrons – selected and trained, from the 1850s, by British Ladies Female Emigration Society. Supervised by the ship's surgeon and affiliated with the evangelical wing of the Church of England, matrons were expected to provide moral supervision of the passenger body, to be of high character, and to provide distractions that were both self-improving and religious in tone. By the 1870s this was becoming a well-established system, with some matrons not merely serving on a single voyage (as emigrants themselves), but serially and professionally, back and forth along a route. Some two hundred and nineteen



women earned their passage as matrons aboard the *Great Britain* between 1859 and 1873.

Of course, emigration was not just a matter of private and public pressures and incentives. It was also about a cluster of technologies, many of which were being trialled aboard the SS *Great Britain* (longest passenger ship in the world until 1854; the first ocean-going ship to combine iron construction and a screw propeller), and which in combination made the undertaking less daunting. The passage still had its trials, of course – more than 140 people died aboard *Great Britain* between 1852 and 1882, from more than fifty separate causes – but whereas in the eighteenth century the prevailing image of a voyage overseas was of a rupture, a form of exile (one historian has called it “a kind of figurative death”), these technological innovations worked to “reduce the awful finality of emigration”. By the second decade of *Great Britain*’s career, ocean-going steamships were already cheaper and faster than sailing vessels, and they only got progressively larger, more powerful and less costly as the century went on.

Communications are all about time (the journey), space (the conquest of distance), and risk (namely its mitigation through information and regularity/scheduling). The nineteenth century saw drastic improvements in the management of all three, and an enormous increase in world shipping tonnage resulted, from about four million net tons in 1800 to almost thirty-five million net tons in 1910. Spectacular projects like the Suez Canal (1869) and later the Panama Canal created a new East-West waterway around the world, never leaving the northern hemisphere. Without these improvements in transport and communications, Europe could not have established itself at the centre of the world economy.

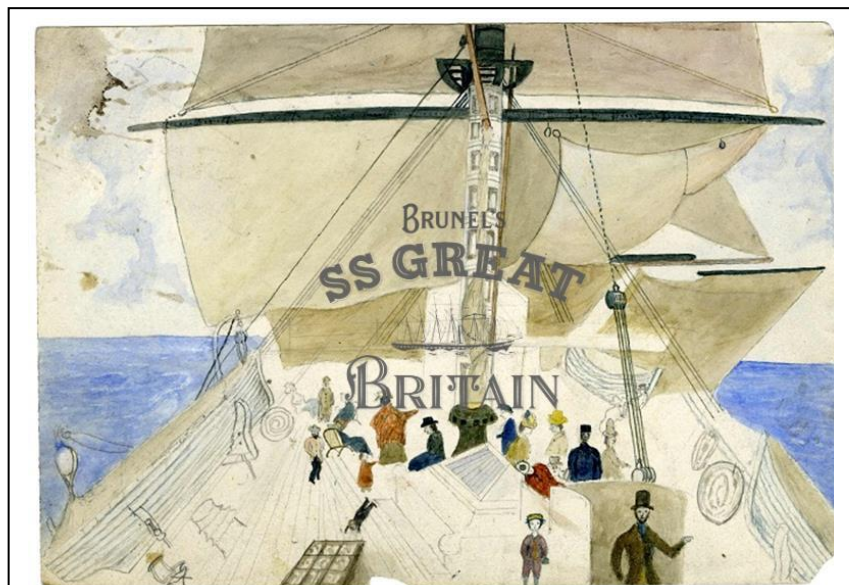
Equally critical to the story of British emigration was the railway, which revolutionized opportunities for white settlement beyond the hinterland of the world’s ports. Rail introduced entirely new conceptions of speed and time. Its impact was so great that in the eighty years before 1914 it is thought to have reduced the costs of transport on land by half, and this proved critical to the expansion of new industries in settler economies across the nineteenth century – opening areas to new and more intense forms of cultivation, grazing, and mining. The railway was thus a factor of great importance in settlers’ penetration of the great land masses of America, Canada, Australia, Argentina.

We might also think of the entire information industry that surrounded British emigrants – particularly from the 1830s to the 1870s – as another ‘technology’: pamphlets on where to go; guides on what to bring; packages to offer emigrants passage and shipping in comfort; land companies offering onward transportation and, of course, land; and a stream of colonization journals, periodicals, and newspapers – to say nothing of the private letters and encouragements of one generation of a family’s emigrants to another – the kind of material this [Brunel] Institute has been so dedicated to conserving for future generations. From the 1830s, the introduction of Government Agents in major emigration ports also worked to coordinate and to publicise standards on how

passengers were to be treated and governed aboard ship; a succession of Emigrants Acts in the 1840s and 1850s improved conditions, even as they imposed strict moral expectations around onboard behaviour – especially the separation of the sexes.

In 1834, a new Poor Law explicitly allocated funds to parishes to emigrate the poor. Most British emigrants, however, still went freely and paid their way – in relatively small numbers in the 1820s, but growing by the 1830s. The Great Irish Famine of 1845 pushed up the numbers dramatically – around 2.5 million Britons went overseas in the following eight years, mostly Irish – but by the 1850s the overall numbers were again in decline. They revived in the 1860s, and in the 1880s reached the highest levels of the nineteenth century – by then, most emigrants were English and Scottish. British emigrants to north America were increasingly from urban backgrounds by the 1880s and included growing numbers of unskilled workers. Many of them were themselves the children and grandchildren of internal migrants within the British Isles – descendants of those who had moved from the country to the town – so that we might think of British overseas migration, again, not as a clear break with the past, but as part of a continuity of migration within and beyond these Isles. It was only in the first decade of the twentieth century, however, that locations within the Empire – Canada and Australia first among them – became the favoured destination of British emigrants; until then, and throughout the nineteenth century, the United States took the most.

Was that a problem?  
Did it matter if  
successive waves of  
British emigrants left  
the orbit of Britain and  
its empire behind, and  
gave their futures to a  
different – and  
sometimes rival –  
power? The traveller  
and Liberal MP Charles  
Dilke didn't think so:  
wherever they went,  
including the United  
States, British  
emigrants would spread  
a conception of



Brunel Institute collections: 2001.007, G.P. Hughes, 'Watercolour of a scene on deck of the *Great Britain*' (1874).

Britishness, their values, and a British take on the world. But others, like J.A. Froude and J.R. Seeley, did care, fearing their departure was a dead loss to the British nation – that their energies, their dynamism, and their youth – all sorely needed in Britain's developing territories and possessions – was being haemorrhaged abroad. Of course, the factors influencing the choice of destination of emigrants themselves were generally much

more prosaic – personal recommendations, family networks; where you went was most often influenced by those who knew who had gone before you, and letters from emigrants were often key to sounding out the best prospects. So too were flows of remittances – and an emigrant voyage was paid by relatives already overseas, sending back surplus earnings to cover outward travel.

For those who were most vexed by American predominance, however, Britain's best alternative – and the most obvious replacement for the 13 Colonies themselves - were the empire's five large colonies of white settlement: Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and Newfoundland. After 1907, these were known as the Dominions, and in all of them substantial portions of the population were made up of white British families who had emigrated in the hope of a better life, or single men who had come to exploit a new resource - wool and gold in Australia, furs and timber in Canada, gold and diamonds again in South Africa - and stayed to form families. In general, these settler economies were oriented around identifying, developing and then exporting a single, dominant "staple" commodity for export – wheat in Canada, for example – of which the British consumer was often the single largest buyer. As a result, throughout the nineteenth century, economic, social and political life in these settler colonies was often oriented around the production of a particular commodity and the importance of Britain as the lead consumer of that commodity. Securing sole access to these particular resources - the vast plains required to grow Canadian wheat, or the uplands for grazing sheep in New Zealand - brought settlers into conflict with indigenous societies: managing that conflict, sometimes in ways which settlers did not like, was a crucial part of Britain's influence in the early years of the settler colonies.

Across the century, a succession of deals would be struck in which London renounced the right to interfere in their internal colonial affairs in exchange for retaining control over all foreign affairs and defence. Recognizing settlers' rights to a degree of autonomy as Englishmen carried a risk - memories of 13 Colonies! But statesmen in London and Governors on the spot often calculated that granting local autonomy would head off more radical separatist demands, and could keep the Dominions, as they became known, in the British orbit. Nonetheless, the path to internal autonomy was not smooth - and talk of racial affinities between Britannia and her 'sisters', or the progressive rise of an 'enlightened' imperialism, masked much friction and violence along the way. Moreover, Dominion status itself masked the fact that the specific nature of the British connection - the industries or commodities involved, the rate of return migration, the demographic breakdown and race relations on the spot - varied enormously from case to case.

With that in mind, let's examine the destination so important to *SS Great Britain's* career, and to the lives of the thousands of emigrants she carried in the 1850s, 60s, and 70s: Australia.

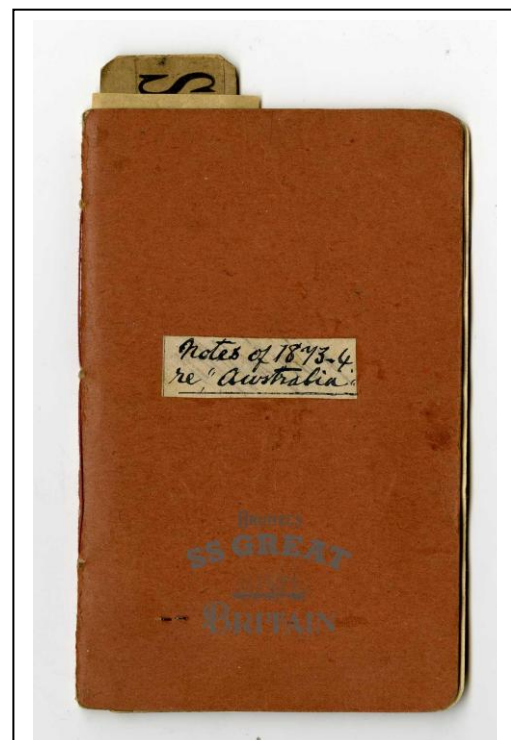


## II Destination: Australia

When Gibbs, Bright of Liverpool purchased *Great Britain* in 1850, they were themselves exploring the potential of breaking out of the North American trade with which they were most familiar and weighing the value of opportunities in Australia. In the short term, the conversion of the ship to carry a new third class of accommodation and up to 730 passengers, more than treble the number she took on a trans-Atlantic crossing, happened in order to capitalise on the Victorian Gold Rush. Six hundred and thirty passengers were taken on the first run to Melbourne in 1852; on her first return voyage in January 1853, she carried 100,000 ounces of gold worth over half a million pounds. But more broadly, the Liverpool Company hoped the growing sophistication of the Australian economy and the expansion of its pastoral land would underpin a sustainable passenger traffic: wool, not gold, would be the key 'staple' to drive British emigration to Australia.

In the wake of the American Revolution, Australia had largely featured in British emigration thinking as an answer to the question of where the state might now send its convicts. The first convict colony was established at Botany Bay in 1788, with others following at Port Philip Bay in 1802 and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1804. Convict transportation to Tasmania only ended in 1853, so between 1788 and 1854 between 150,000 and 160,000 people were thus landed in Australia: 123,000 of them men. Free migration began in 1793, but remained very small for decades. In 1828, there were less than five thousand free immigrants in New South Wales, out of a total white population of 37,000.

And yet the demography of Australia would be utterly transformed in the nineteenth century. In 1815, Australia's white population was still largely confined to garrison towns around Sydney and Hobart, with a far larger indigenous population in the interior and everywhere else. This position was reversed over the course of the century. By 1861, there were a million colonists in Australia; by 1911, 4.5 million. Their arrival accelerated the dispossession and decline of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the years before the First World War.



Brunel Institute collections: 1999.004.1, A.E.  
Rowland, 'Book with Notes of 1873-4 re: Australia'.

SS *Great Britain* and the Gold Rush was part of that process, but both were made possible by the broader expansion of the pastoral economy and – as in the case of the 13 Colonies – the inability of the labour supply to keep up. Wool exports integrated the Australian colonies into the global economy, and colonists remained heavily dependent upon Britain as a consumer and as a source of capital. By the 1830s, several colonial governments in Australia had begun drafting their own state assistance programmes to try and lure British emigrants to work in Australia – and it was at this time that European sheep ranges really begin to break settler society out of its coastal beach-heads, increasing rates of frontier conflict with Aboriginal societies, with violence often instigated by settler groups seeking to deepen their hold on the land.

The discovery of Gold in Victoria in the 1850s began a multi-decade immigration boom, drove dramatic growth in Australia's urban population, and transformed "Marvellous Melbourne" into one of the largest cities in the English-speaking world. Indeed, the Antipodean gold rushes coincided with periods of dramatic economic growth, so that in 1852 British migrants bucked the general trend that favoured North American destinations, with a noticeably larger percentage heading for Australia.

As the prominence of both the gold rushes and the pastoral economy in this narrative suggest, emigration assistance programmes were particularly keen to attract women to offset the gender imbalance of this frontier society: between 1832 and 1836 more than 3,000 single British women were given free grants in aid of £8 to cover cost of settling in Australia. There was much criticism of this for targeting vulnerable women in Britain

(some alleged it amounted to a system of white slavery), but other schemes persisted well into mid-century, with women depicted as being necessary for the taming of a wild frontier land, set up as archetypes of domesticity and order against the rough and roving 'swagmen'. Government, private enterprise, and charities all got in on the act, with child migration schemes already coming in for sharp criticism by the 1850s. In general, British

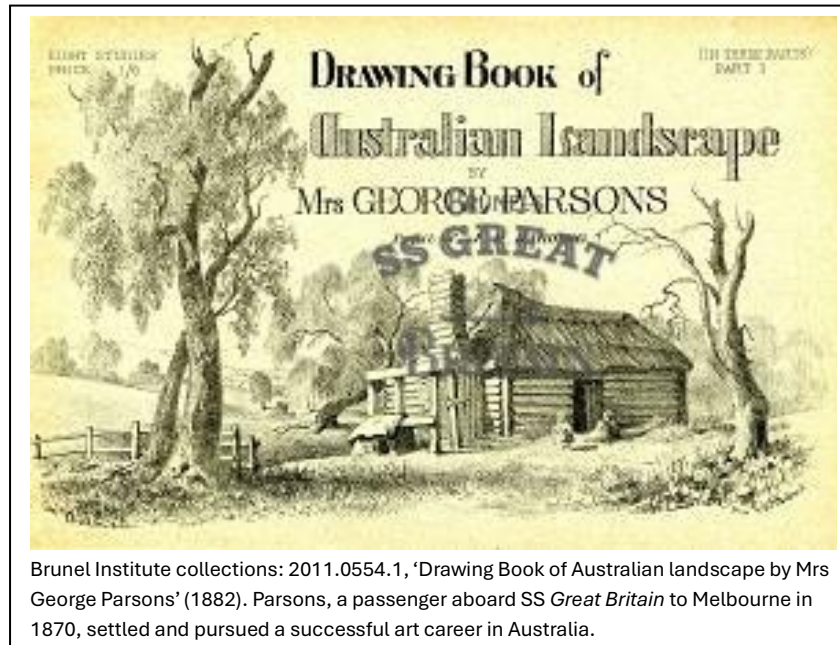
organisations' emphasis on supporting pauper emigration was resented by Australia's colonial governments, who cried out for skilled workers; and over the nineteenth century, in general, it was the colonial governments who took on greater responsibility for the management of their own immigration affairs.



Brunel Institute collections: 1997.048, 'Envelope sent to England from SS Great Britain in Sydney' (1852-3).

The art produced by many British emigrants to Australia shows a similar journey across the century. Many must have been struck by the strangeness of the landscape upon their first exposure to it, and found the experience disorienting, even alienating. One

response to this, by early colonial artists, was to deliberately try and look past the differences, and to paint only similarity: thus a whole genre of British art of Australia in which Australian landscapes were rendered like English parks. It took time for artists and novelists to warm to the novelties and specificity of their new environment – even, to embrace that difference, and to incorporate it into a distinct colonial identity, as a part of a new colonial “character” – in romances of the “bush”, for example. But by then,



the damage had often already been done, ecologically-speaking: the drastic introduction of European sheep into Australia broke up its soils, damaged its grasses, exposed its earth and accelerated its desiccation. This was not only the fault of European rabbits introduced to help tame the environment (and which then got out of control), but also camels from elsewhere

in the British Empire, from India, which settlers planned to use to develop new inland communication networks. These too went feral, so that there are now something like three-quarters-of-a-million wild camels in the Australian interior, destroying trees, damaging fences ... and drinking dry the waterholes that once been carefully managed by Aboriginal people.

But that question of who got to control immigration become a central battleground of colonial politics, a rallying point for those who wanted to put the needs of the colony first, ahead of those of Britain. At the beginning of the century, when penal settlements dominated the settler landscape, political power was vested in relatively autocratic governors and forms of military control. It was slowly transferred to appointed Councils in the 1820s, then Councils elected on a limited property franchise, then to colonial parliaments. In 1850, as *SS Great Britain* began her refit for the Australia line, the British government first offered what was known as “Responsible Government”, on the Canadian model, to the Australian Colonies – a reflection of the colonists’ growing wealth and numbers, and a bid to head off more ambitious demands for political control. Subsequently, the Colonies would agree to delegate some of their powers to a new, federal government – this the 1901 Commonwealth of Australia – in order to better negotiate with Britain, from a position of strength, on the issues that really mattered to them: on defence, on the economy, and, of course, on immigration. One of its first Acts

was to pass the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which was an important part of the “White Australia” Policy. But this was not, in the nineteenth century, tantamount to a bid to throw off the British connection altogether: quite the opposite. A politics of loyalism was key to how the future relationship was envisaged. For all the growth in Australia’s white population across the century, settlers still felt insecure in the face of the “tyranny of distance” from the imperial metropole, and from fears of being overwhelmed by Asian migration in the near future. This helped to promote an accentuated politics of race and race loyalty – of talking up “Britishness”, the British connection, the existence of a “British Race”, in order to ensure ongoing access to Britain’s capital, resources, and support. Australian nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, then, was relatively gentle in how it boxed with London. It reserved its real bile and its bite for the Chinese and the Japanese, even to the point of embarrassing London in *its* attempts to treat with those powers.

### III Themes and Approaches

Emigration, then, was an enormously diverse experience; driven by a mix of economic pressures and opportunities; private initiatives and family histories; technological capabilities and infrastructural transformations; in diverse geopolitical contexts and with manifold geopolitical consequences. Rather than try to generalise about it, by way of conclusion, I want to point to a set of approaches to it that have interested historians in recent years.

The first is to think of British emigration as one of a number of distinctive flows of migrant labour that had built a new world economy by 1914. The world was on the move in the nineteenth century, but not all in the same direction, and not all equally. Perhaps as many as 40 million Europeans migrated overseas between the 1850 refit of SS *Great Britain* and the end of the First World War, and no nation was more affected by that explosion of mobility than Britain: Scandinavians, Germans, Italians, Poles, and Russians all comprised substantial emigrant groups in mid-century, but by far the largest group of migrants at that time still came from Britain and Ireland. Yet it’s vital to realise that it was not only Europeans on the move, and that the world economy built by 1914 had not been an entirely European achievement. The growth of raw cotton, for example – so crucial to the story of Britain’s engagement with the rest of the world – had been advanced by the large-scale forced migration of Africans across the Atlantic – slavery – and there were also large-scale migrations of Indians and Chinese in the nineteenth century, through systems of indentured labour, driving, for example, the expansion of rice agriculture in Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam. Historians are increasingly exploring how these migrant experiences interacted, and how empires and states worked to try and police the boundaries between them: in general, white and non-white migrants did not compete in the same markets in the nineteenth century.

Imperialism facilitates some forms of movement – the emigration of white populations to their favoured destinations, the settler colonies, for example – while constraining or frustrating the movements of others; the ‘White Australia’ policy is just one example of this.

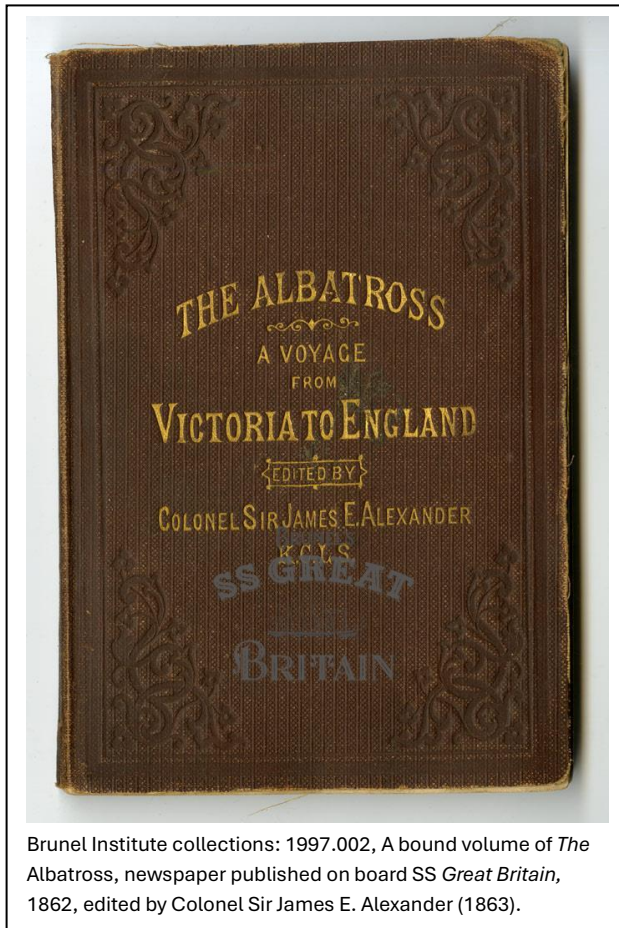
Secondly, we should note that despite the sheer scale of emigration in the nineteenth century, the penetration of the interiors of many of Britain’s colonies of settlement was patchy, uneven, and still far from complete, even by the century’s end. In Britain, the propagandists of emigration often set forth a vision of hardy yeoman going forth to populate and to make fruitful the “empty” places of the world; families prepared to till the soil and transform the land; Christian labour, good both for the moral condition of the individual, and for the material condition of the nation. In practice, however many British emigrants came into port cities, and never left them, lacking the funds for onward travel, or being drawn into urban wage labour to raise the funds to bring over their relatives. The process of surveying, settling, and developing continental interiors was as much a story of the twentieth century as the nineteenth, with its associated histories of struggles over land and rendering the landscape legible – turning the reality of the natural environment into topographic knowledge; I hope you’ll forgive this brief plug, but that modern story of the transformation of inland spaces is something my colleagues and I have been working on lately for a new book on *Inlands: Empires, Contested Interiors, and the Connection of the World*, and which was just published at the end of last year.

A third theme is the recognition that our histories of British emigration can’t stop at the shoreline, but should follow through how the thirst for immigrants, indeed the competition between colonies to attract those immigrants, shaped the very nature of politics in settler contexts in the nineteenth century. Land – access to it, the condition of it, the marketing and purchase of it – was everything. Initially, colonial governments worked to accelerate settler occupation of the land so as to build colonies capable of feeding themselves; then to find a staple for export, something useful to the home economy which could also generate foreign earnings, and balance colonial budgets. But colonial governmental objectives were not always shared by British migrants themselves. Migrants often wanted land parcelled out in small grants, while government, preoccupied with questions of stability, tried to replicate the conditions of social hierarchy at home by creating a smaller number of larger landowners. This was a common friction and a common part of the emigrant experience, from Ontario in Upper Canada at the beginning of the nineteenth century, to tensions in Australia in the 1850s, and resentment towards its larger landowners, the so-called “shepherd kings”.

Nor was this the only way land questions generated friction and dominated the political scene. Migrant demands for land repeatedly generated bloody conflict with indigenous societies, in which London was reluctantly forced to intervene and sometimes commit troops. These actions also gave rise to new humanitarian groups back in the imperial



capital, such as the Aborigines Protection Society of 1837, founded by the Quaker Thomas Hodgkin to represent what it saw as the proper interests of the Empire's indigenous societies. Hodgkin poured scorn on settler maltreatment of indigenous societies, and became a hate figure for many settlers, but his organisation had its own quite prescriptive visions of what was, and what wasn't right for indigenous people, so that its interventions have lately been re-interpreted as examples of "humanitarian imperialism" by historians.



Yet another form of land tension to explore is one we have already hinted at in our whirlwind tour through Australia's nineteenth century: the campaigns by British emigrants to the settler empire to discriminate against the movement of *other* would-be migrants.

Sometimes, as in mid-century Australia, this took the form of expressing anger towards London for emigration scheme predicated on dumping "undesirable" populations on Australia's shores. In Canada after 1896, the expansion of prairie agriculture drew in new waves of migrants from Europe, causing anxiety and xenophobia about the dilution of the "British" percentage of the population. Fears about Asian immigration were the sharpest of all, and historians have explored the different but connected contexts and actors behind a string of Asian

Exclusion Acts passed around the British settler world in the later nineteenth century, as well as acts of unrest and violence, from Canada and Australia to South Africa and the United States.

Finally, there is the question of the impact of the emigrant experience on identity. How did it shape the British emigrant's view of his or her place in the world, and their relationship with the British Isles? After all, as we have seen, colonial interests and those of the home government did not always neatly align; disagreement and friction were common. But what this meant at an individual level for the thousands of men, women and children carried by SS *Great Britain* across her career is not so easy to tell. Our passengers were taken out to their destinations past a succession of British maritime and imperial possessions – coaling depots, naval stations, and the like – so

that few can have left the experience unimpressed of the reach and power of the British empire at sea. Shipboard newspapers commonly started by passengers – like *The Cabinet* of 1861, or the *Albatross* of 1862, both on *Great Britain* – were a chance to form a community and – perhaps – to reframe an assortment of passengers thrown together as a group of British colonists in-waiting. At their destination, as we have seen, colonial politicians and voluntary organisation often talked up their ‘Britishness’ and celebrated an empire united by the bonds of ‘the British race’, not least to better appeal to London for support in their various struggles. On this enlarged canvas, “emigration”, writes one historian, “played a crucial part in the creation of British identity ... it did not reflect British society, it acted upon it”. But there is really only one way to tell: by diving into the treasure-trove of emigrant papers, letters, and emigration ephemera held in trust for us by organisations such as this one.

*Brunel Institute, Bristol*  
19 February 2025

### **Further Reading**

The S.S. Great Britain is a storied and well-studied ship, and while there remains much to discover about her voyages and those who sailed on her, we are fortunate to have many excellent publications to guide us on our way. Helen Doe’s *SS Great Britain: Brunel’s Ship, Her Voyages, Passengers, and Crew* (2019) is a superb single volume study of the ship and her times. Jean Young’s *The World’s First Great Ocean Liner: A Select Bibliography of the SS Great Britain 1834 to 1970* (2003) provides useful directions towards work on many different aspects of the ship’s history. Excellent accounts of the ship’s construction and salvage can be found in Ewan Corlett’s *The Iron Ship: the story of Brunell’s SS Great Britain* (2012) and Andrew Lambert, Dennis Griffiths, and Fred Walker, *Brunel’s Ships* (1999); Richard Goold-Adams’s book *The Return of the “Great Britain”* (1976) covers the ship’s journey back to Bristol from the Falkland Islands. Shani Whyte’s *Tying the Tides: the colour within the SS Great Britain* (2023) highlights the histories of people of colour who worked or travelled aboard; the ship’s legacy in visual media is featured in A. Bell and D. Wright’s attractive book, *S.S. Great Britain* (1981). For a broader study of the steamships of the age, see Stephen Fox, *The Ocean Railway: Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Samuel Cunard and the Revolutionary World of the Great Atlantic Steamships* (2003).

Among the many useful studies of British emigration in the nineteenth century, I have here drawn upon: Dudley Baines, *Emigration from Europe, 1815-1930* (1991); Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: networks of people, goods and capital in the British world, c.1850-1914* (2010); Charlotte Erickson, *Leaving England: essays on British emigration in the nineteenth century* (1994); Oliver MacDonagh, *Emigration in the Victorian age: debates on the issue from 19th century critical journals*

(1973); Robert Bickers (ed.), *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the seas* (2010); and Alexander Murdoch, *British Emigration, 1603-1914* (London, 2004) – the remarks on “figurative death” quoted here are his. The Australian experience can be explored further with Geoffrey Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers: a history of Australians shaping their environment* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1992); Alan Atkinson’s three volume study *The Europeans in Australia* (1997-2014); Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward (eds.), *Australia’s Empire* (2008); and James Jupp, *The English in Australia* (2004). Immigration restriction policies are the subject of Charles Price, *The Great White Walls are Built: restrictive immigration to North America and Australasia, 1836-1888* (1974) and Benjamin Mountford, *Britain, China, and Colonial Australia* (2016).

Scholarship on Britain, the sea, and empire continues to thrive: great introductions are provided by David Cannadine (ed.), *Empire, the Sea, and Britain’s Maritime World, c. 1760-c.1840* (2007), and essays by Tamson Pietsch, ‘A British Sea: making sense of global space in the late nineteenth century’ (2010) and Glen O’Hara, ‘“The Sea is Swinging Into View”: modern British maritime history in a globalised world’ (2009). For more on the phenomenon of shipboard newspapers in which *SS Great Britain*’s own history is so rich, see: J. de Schmidt, ‘“This Strange Little Floating World of Ours”: shipboard periodicals and community-building in the “global” nineteenth century’ (2016); F. Shaikh, *Nineteenth-Century Settler Emigration in British Literature and Art* (2018); and S. Liebich and L. Publicover (eds.), *Shipboard Literary Cultures: reading, writing, and performing at sea* (2021).

### **Author Biography**

Robert Fletcher is Professor of History and Kinder Professor of British History at the University of Missouri. A historian of empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he has written widely on British expansion in Asia and the Pacific. His books include *British Imperialism and “The Tribal Question”: desert administration and nomadic societies in the Middle East, 1919-1936* (2015) and *The Ghost of Namamugi: Charles Lenox Richardson and the Anglo-Satsuma War* (2019).

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