

Scholarly Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange between Universities in Britain and the Empire, 1850-1914

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Recently, there has been growing interest among scholars in the British Empire as a space of knowledge production and circulation. Much of this work assumes that scholarly cooperation between individuals and institutions within the empire had the effect (and often also the aim) of strengthening imperial ties and supporting the idea of empire. By contrast, this paper will suggest that many examples of scholarly collaboration were undertaken with very different goals in mind. In particular, it will argue for the continuing importance of an ideal of scientific internationalism which stressed the benefits of scholarship for the whole of humanity. It will suggest that in the period known to historians as the hey-day of nationalism and empire, scholarly collaboration within the British Empire represented a significant and little-appreciated counter-discourse which deserves more attention than it has as yet received. Far from viewing academic cooperation within the empire as a means with which to support a national and imperial agenda, many scholars saw imperial networks as providing an unrivalled opportunity for reviving the early-modern ideal of an international 'Republic of Letters.' Some even developed nuanced critiques of the imperial project whilst using the very structures of empire to further their own individual and institutional goals. The paper will examine various forms of academic collaboration between individual scholars and universities in Britain and their counterparts in the wider empire, in particular, joint monograph projects, the setting up of collaborative journals and the writing of academic reviews. Also considered will be the organisation of collaborative research trips and exhibitions, particularly in the fields of geography, anthropology and ethnography, which, I will argue, reveal clearly the ways in which scholars, keen to secure the reputation of emerging academic disciplines, made extensive use of the structures of empire without necessarily subscribing to an imperial ideology.