

The Round Table Movement and the Fall of the 'Second' British Empire (1909-1919)

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By

Andrea Bosco

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To Luigi Vittorio Majocchi
master in the art of maieutic

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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

Brand Papers (BrP)	Meston Papers (MeP)
Bryce Papers, (BP)	Milner Fond (MF)
Cabinet Papers (CABP)	Milner Papers (MP)
Cecil Papers (CeP)	Montagu Papers (MoP)
Chatham House Papers (CHP)	Murray Papers (MuP)
Chelmsford Papers, (ChP)	Round Table Papers (RTP)
Colonial Office (CO)	Royal Commonwealth Society Papers (RCSP)
Colonial Office Papers (COP)	Sea Cadet Association Papers (SCAP)
Curtis Papers (CP)	Selborne Papers (SP)
Dawson Papers (DP)	Seton-Watson Papers (S-WP)
Dover Wilson Papers (DWP)	Toynbee Papers (TP)
Foreign Office Papers (FOP)	Zimmern Papers (ZP)
Imperial War Cabinet Papers (IWCP)	Walker Papers, (WP)
Lloyd George Papers (LGP)	War Cabinet Papers (WCP)
Lothian Papers (LP)	Wrong Papers (WrP)
Mansbridge Papers (MaP)	

“The future of the world depends upon the gradual recognition,
by the rest of the world, of the fundamental principles
which lie at the heart of Anglo-Saxon civilization.”¹

¹ Kerr to Curtis, 9 June 1920, LP, 208/255-8.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the phobia of federalism, there is a strong federalist trend within British political culture. In three very different historical contexts federalism inspired the action of political movements such as the Imperial Federation League, the Round Table and the Federal Union. Federalism was then regarded as the solution to problems arising from the first signs of crisis, the disintegration and the possible collapse of Great Britain and its Empire. The life of those movements was relatively short, and when their political failure became manifest, they turned into 'educational' organizations: the Imperial Institute, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and the Federal Trust for Education and Research.¹

Debate on federalism was introduced into Great Britain in 1832 by John Austin, and developed by John Stuart Mill, Henry Parkes, Goldwin Smith, Julius Vogel, Robert Stout, John X. Merriman, C. R. Lowell, James Bryce, Henry Sidgwick, Charles Dilke, Auberon Herbert, Edward Jenkins, Albert Venn Dicey, John Seeley, Lord Acton, and Edward Freeman. From the mid-Nineteenth century federalism emerged as an alternative constitutional model to the unitarian state, able to resolve problems connected with granting self-government to the colonies while maintaining a wide-flung Imperial union.²

¹ Michael Burgess, *The British Tradition of Federalism* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995); John Kandle, *Federal Britain* (London: Routledge, 1997); id., *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); John Pinder and Richard Maine, *Federal Union. The Pioneers* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Andrea Bosco, *Federal Union e l'unione franco-britannica. Il dibattito federalista nel Regno Unito dal Patto di Monaco al crollo della Francia (1938-1940)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).

² John Austin, *Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, n.d.); John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty; Representative Government; The Subjection of Women: Three Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); Henry Parkes, "Our Growing Australian Empire," *Nineteenth Century*, 15, (1884): 138-49; id., "Australia and the Imperial Connection," *Nineteenth Century*, 15, (1884): 867-72; Robert Stout, "A Colonial View of Imperial Federation," *Nineteenth Century*, 21, (1887): 351-61; John X. Merriman, "The Closer Union of the Empire," *Nineteenth Century*, 21, (1887): 507-16; Goldwin Smith, "The Canadian Constitution," *Contemporary Review*, 52, (1887): 1-20; C. R. Lowell,

With the creation in 1884 of the Imperial Federation League—and the production, at the suggestion of Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, of a ‘Federal Plan’ in 1892, aiming to secure by federation the permanent unity of the Empire—for almost a decade federalism gained increasing support among the British public at large. The formation of 31 branches throughout the country, and in Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand—totalling over 2,000 members—fostered closer Imperial union and encouraged the colonies to share the burden—financial and military—of Imperial defence, at a time of rising nationalism and power politics in Europe.³

However, following the rejection by Gladstone in April 1893 both of the League’s ‘Federal Plan’, and of the request for an Imperial *ad hoc* Conference to discuss reforms of Imperial relations, the League collapsed in December 1893, failing to agree upon an alternative policy for the 1890s or to find a compromise among the conflicting schools which coexisted within it. Since it was the expression of heterogeneous currents of opinion, united only by a common interest in promoting a radical solution of the Imperial and Irish questions, the League was not able to express a well-defined political culture, in spite of the publication, since

“English and American Federalism,” *Fortnightly Review*, 49, (1888): 189-95; James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (London: Macmillan, 1891) 3 vols.; id., *Studies in History and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901); Henry Sidgwick, *Elements of Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1919); id., *The Development of European Polity* (London: 1903), 436-7, 439; id., *The Elements of Politics* (London: 1897); Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain* (London: 1865); Auberon Herbert, “The Canadian Confederation,” *Fortnightly Review*, 7, (1876); Edward Jenkins, “Imperial Federalism,” *Contemporary Review*, 16, (1871): 165-88; id., “An Imperial Confederation,” *ibidem*, 17, (1871); Albert V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (London: 1885); id., *England’s Case Against Home Rule* (Richmond: 1873); John R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London: 1883); id., “United States of Europe,” *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 23 (March 1871); John E. E. Dalberg-Acton, *The History of Freedom and other Essays* (London: 1907); Edward Freeman, *History of the Federal Government from the Foundation of the Achaean League to the Disruption of the United States* (London: 1863); id., “Imperial Federation,” *MacMillan’s Magazine*, (April 1885): 430.

³ Michael Burgess, “‘Forgotten Centenary’: The Formation of the Imperial Federation in the UK,” *The Round Table*, 289, (1984): 76-85; id., “Imperial Federation: Continuity and Change in British Imperial Ideas, 1869-1871,” *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 17, 2, (1983).

January 1886, of the monthly *Imperial Federation* and the creation in 1888 of the Imperial Institute.⁴

The ambiguity in which the federal idea was proposed, in the guise of simple devolution, was a consequence of the contradiction in terms of the concept of 'Imperial federation', where Imperial was just the opposite of federation. The federal principle seemed more applicable to England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales rather than to the Empire, since their existence as former distinct states—which had opted for the unitarian principle—meant their consent to amending the form of union. Nationalist sentiment, however, would have welcomed the application of the federal principle, with the creation of independent legislatures and executives, as an intermediate stage towards full independence.

The instance of Ireland, merged with the United Kingdom in 1801, provided the most complex trial for federalism. The failure of the Gladstone 1886 plan (as well as of similar plans of 1893 and 1912) allowed just a devolutionary 'home rule all round'. Instead of autonomous legislatures with well-defined competences, as demanded by the Irish Nationalists (but also by the Scottish, and to a lesser degree by the Welsh), Ireland was ultimately accorded local institutions with increased administrative and legislative powers, delegated by Westminster, within a unitarian system of government.⁵

The creation in September 1909 of the Round Table Movement marked a turning point in the debate on federalism and in its application both at home and in the Empire. Having been imbued with the Imperial ideology produced by Oxford in the late Nineteenth century, for the Round Tablers federalism was a political and constitutional form to be filled with an historical content: the British Empire. The dominant ideas at Oxford at the time included Burke's theory of organic unity, social Darwinism, the absolute certainty of the superiority of 'white culture' (and in particular English), the sense of responsibility towards non-Europeans, and finally the idea of Imperial mission. The writers who mostly influenced the intellectual development of the Round Tablers were Freeman, with his theory of the linear development of the principle of self-government following the Anglo-Saxon experience of the parliamentary system, and T.

⁴ Michael Burgess, "The Federal Plan of the Imperial Federation League 1892: Milestone or Tombstone?" in *The Federal Idea. The History of Federalism from the Enlightenment to 1945*, Andrea Bosco ed. (London: 1991), 139-53.

⁵ John Kandle, *Ireland and the Federal Solution: The Debate Over the United Kingdom Constitution, 1870-1921* (Kingston and Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).

H. Green, with his Hegelian concept of development and social reforms as a moral duty.⁶

The Oxford approach to Imperial questions seemed, according to Ronald Robinson, “unmistakable,” characterized by the “high moral tone, the lofty view which Mansergh called ‘largess of mind’,” and the inclination “for tracing philosophical antithesis through long historical perspectives, for presenting the Imperial record teleologically in terms of an ideal end.” The Round Tablers were imbued by a climate, “where philosophy was linguistic, and secular scepticism poured on religiosity.”⁷

The Round Table developed and propagated a political ideology which would have promoted and accompanied the transition from a British leadership of the Empire into an equal partnership among its component parts. The alternative to organic union would have been disruption, as happened to the Athenian ‘insular’ Empire, finally defeated, on the sea, by an alliance of two ‘continental’ powers, Sparta and Persia. The invention of the principle of representation, and of federal government, they thought, were contributions which the Anglo-Saxon political tradition had offered to the development of the principle of self-government invented and experimented with in Athens, making thus possible its application to the national, and then to the supranational levels. The deep meaning of their mission sprang from the awareness of living at a time of crisis, which could be overcome only through the extension and application of the democratic principle beyond the nation-State, seen as the cause of international anarchy. If it were not possible to achieve that goal within the English-speaking peoples, who were the most advanced in the art of responsible and democratic government, they believed that nobody else could have succeeded. The British Empire in fact appeared to the Round Tablers as the most congenial organization of States to start with, in order to create and consolidate a federal nucleus set for enlargement.

The Round Table’s main argument supporting the case for a closer Imperial union was based on the growing Anglo-German rivalry, which represented a renewal of the traditional rivalry between the continental and

⁶ Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: The First Conservative* (London: Basic Books, 2013); Yuval Levin, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left* (London: Basic Books, 2014); Geoffrey Thomas, *The Moral Philosophy of T. H. Green* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988); Maria Dimova-Cookson and William J. Mande eds., *T. H. Green: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006).

⁷ Ronald Robinson, “Oxford in Imperial Historiography,” in *Oxford and the Idea of Commonwealth*, Frederick Madden and David K. Fieldhouse eds. (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 42-3.

the insular systems, which in their essence were antagonist. If the continental system was based on centralization of powers, autocratic and militaristic by nature, the British was based on the liberties of the individual citizen, decentralization, and representative democracy. Continental pressure brought the British governments to slow down and limit the process of devolution of powers from the centre to the periphery of the Empire—an Empire which was itself an economically and politically evolving entity, bound to be re-defined on the basis of the principle of equal partnership.

The question of the defence of the Empire—and therefore the survival of British political culture and institutions—depended very much on the Royal Navy's supremacy on the seas, challenged by the strongest Continental State at that time, Germany, as in the past it had been challenged by Spain and France. Great Britain could not any longer bear alone the cost of naval rearmament, which was designed not just to prevent a German invasion of the British coasts, but also to protect the independence of all the component parts of the Empire, which had therefore to take a full share in this task. The protection which Britain had successfully offered the Dominions, giving them the possibility of developing their economies and self-government, was called into question by the pressure of events, which required a direct assumption of responsibility for the maintenance of their own security and their free institutions.

As soon as the Round Tablers realized that the Dominions needed to go all the way through the full exercise of national sovereignty before being ready to federate, they turned to the United States, and envisaged a period of time during which through Anglo-American co-operation and alliance it would be possible to restore the necessary international economic and political stability to give time for federal ideas to take root. Economic and political co-operation between Great Britain and her thirteen rebellious former colonies was then regarded by the Round Table as the only practical solution to the problem of world instability, inherent in the political division of the world into sovereign States.

The place of the Round Table Movement in the history of the British Empire could be compared to that of the sun at noon, the moment of its greatest radiance but also the beginning of a rapid and inexorable decline. What the Round Tablers attempted to do was to reverse that inexorableness. Could the history of the British Empire diverge from the fate which marked all the empires in the course of history? This was the challenge which the Round Tablers took up. The aim of this volume is to discuss the strategies and means employed in this fascinating venture.

The Round Tablers were, at the beginning of the venture, young men. However, they remained loyal to the cause—to different degrees, but nevertheless loyal—for all the rest of their lives. They were not, therefore, victims of a youthful delirium of omnipotence, but actors in a coherent and persistent programme of action. What they were looking for was not just an answer to the problems of a multi-racial Empire kept together by a provisional convergence of interests, but a radical solution to the problems of interdependence of the modern age, which could be better discerned within the British Empire than anywhere else in the world stage at the time. Their spirit was longing for a deep meaning to give to their lives, and they found it in the Empire. Only later they discovered in federalism the political ideology able to give this existential yearning a political dimension. There was a ‘spiritual’ element at the base of this conversion, and long fidelity, which had its dynamic source in Anglicanism.

“Those were the days when a vision of what the Empire might be made dawned upon certain minds with almost the force of a revelation,” John Buchan wrote retrospectively, with extraordinary insight and honesty, on his early Round Table days, expressing in words the inner feelings of all his companions. They “dreamed of a world-wide brotherhood with the background of a common race and creed, consecrated to the service of peace.” Great Britain was seen as “enriching the rest out of her culture and traditions, and the spirit of the Dominions like a strong wind freshening the stuffiness of the old lands.” They saw in the Empire “a means of giving to the congested masses at home open country instead of a blind alley.” They saw hope “for a new afflatus in art and literature and thought.” Their creed “was not based on antagonism to any other people,” it was “humanitarian and international.” They believed that they “were laying the basis of a federation of the world.” As for the native races under British rule, they “had a high conscientiousness,” which “involved a new philosophy of politics, and an ethical standard.”⁸

The central figure of the Round Table was Alfred Milner. Milner’s patriotism was centred on the world hegemony of the British Empire: “I am a nationalist...not a cosmopolitan.” “If I am also an Imperialist and not a Little Englander,” Milner declared towards the end of his life, in a sort of farewell statement, “it is because the destiny of the English race...has been to strike fresh roots in distant parts.” Milner’s imperialism knew “no geographical but only racial limits,” and it was based on British cultural and political achievements. He believed that the “competition between

⁸ John Buchan, *Memory Hold the Door* (London: 1940), 120, 124-25.

nations, each seeking its maximum development," was "the law of human progress...the Divine Order of the world, the law of Life."⁹

Milner was the intellectual and political leader of the most progressive school of Imperial thought throughout the Empire. "It was Milner," Leo Amery observed, "who over some twenty years laid securely the foundations of a system whose power in shaping the outlook and spiritual kinship of an ever-growing body of men throughout the English-speaking world it would be difficult to exaggerate." "More people would probably have gone round the world with or for him," Robert Vansittart recorded, "than anyone else in the mist procession" of famous men he had encountered in a long lifetime of public service. George L. Beer identified in Milner's imperialism "all the depth and comprehensiveness of a religious faith," and its significance was "moral even more than material." According to John Kendle, the Empire was for Milner "a substitute religion," and his young men drank "deeply" at his ideological well, "and for the rest of their lives their basic ideas and ideals owed much to Milner's beliefs and convictions." His views were labelled by the Liberal Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannermann as "*religio Milneriana*." Those who were engaged in worship of Milner offered the evidence, according to Campbell-Bannermann, for the "psychological infirmity of the Oxford mind."¹⁰

Perhaps the most illuminating sketch of Milner's character is that of Beatrice Webb. After meeting Milner in 1906, "brooding over South Africa," where he felt his whole "house of cards" was tumbling down, she commented, with her usual sharpness: "A God and a wife would have made Milner, with his faithfulness, persistency, courage, capacity and charm, into a great man: without either, he has been a tragic combination of success and failure."¹¹

⁹ Speech given on 28 Oct. 1901 in Durban: Cecil Headlam, *The Milner Papers. South Africa 1899-1905* (London: Cassel, 1931), 287; Alfred Milner, *The Nation and the Empire* (London: 1913), xxxii, xxxv. Milner's 'Credo' was published after his death in *The Times*, 27 July 1925. Milner to Curtis, 1 Dec. 1908, quoted in Alex May, "The Round Table, 1910-1966" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1995), 26.

¹⁰ Leo Amery, *My Political Life* (London: 1953), vol. 1, 298-9; Lord Vansittart, *The Mist Procession* (London: 1958), 183; A. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies: A Study in British Power* (London: 1985), 131; Kendle, *Round Table Movement*, 4, 10; J. A. Spender, *Life of Campbell Bannerman* (London: 1923), vol. 1, 264.

¹¹ Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie eds., *The Diary of Beatrice Webb* (London: 1984), 3, 49.

Milner's personality was autocratic, and was venerated by his disciples as "H.E." or "his triple X." Buchan wrote that "loyalty to Milner and his creed was a strong cement which endured long after our South African service ended." Milner's nobility of mind, "his entirely natural charm of manner, his lofty idealism, the complete absence of ambitious scheming or of anything approaching self-conceit in his character, and his broad and vigorous patriotism, made him," according to Bruce Lockhart, "the ideal inspirer of youth." With young men Milner "was at his best. He liked to surround himself with them. He believed that they should be given their chance." Lockhart found it hard to write about Milner "in anything but superlatives." "I must have been one of the last of the young men," Lockhart declared, "to worship at his feet and there I have remained."¹²

According to Amery, who recognized in Milner his "spiritual chief" to the end of his days, Milner "approached his conclusions cautiously." But few men "in the same degree had the intellectual courage to accept them unreservedly and follow them out with unflinching tenacity." Milner was "at heart a radical, always ready for far-reaching changes of outlook and method...a constructive radical, thinking in terms of concrete action," but above all he was "an idealist, a man with a vision to which he dedicated his life." It was that forward-looking idealism "which naturally drew younger men to look to him as their leader."¹³

The specific contribution of the Round Table to the development of the federal idea into a political movement was to produce a theory of supranational political action centred on reflection on the question of power. The Round Table theorized on and realized—through Milner's influence on British Unionist and Liberal political élites—the exercise of power not through the traditional instruments of political struggle—the parties, and the control of parliamentary institutions—but through the formation and consolidation of an extra-parliamentary consensus on a specific political agenda. Set a strategic goal, the movement would employ all available means to achieve it, including the manipulation—they called it 'moulding'—of public opinion, and the exercise of coordinated action by a network of associated individuals and organizations. The Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Council on Foreign Relations were the major among them.¹⁴

¹² Buchan, *Memory Hold*, 99; Vladimir Halperin, *Lord Milner and the Empire. Evolution of British Imperialism* (London: 1952), 199.

¹³ Leo Amery, foreword to *Lord Milner*, by Halperin (London: 1952), 22-3.

¹⁴ Stephen King-Hall, *Chatham House: A Brief Account of the Origins, Purposes and Methods of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937); Andrea Bosco and Cornelia Navari eds., *Chatham House*

The creation of *The Round Table*, a quarterly journal devoted entirely to Imperial and foreign affairs, which was produced by the London office in collaboration with colonial editors, and “to which all workers and all important statesmen in the Dominions could be induced to subscribe,” is perhaps the most relevant and lasting contribution of the movement to the evolution of the federal idea, and the consolidation of a political culture which inspired the processes of Atlantic and European unification. The magazine launched the movement worldwide, and became “the recognized organ of the groups in all parts,” influencing those in a position to influence public opinion. The journal was “not intended so much for the average reader, as for those who write for the average reader.” It was an elitist journal which provided “food for thought,” having in each issue three or four lead articles, with the addition of chronicle articles from each Dominion. *The Round Table* preached the gospel of Anglo-Saxonism first developed by Dilke, Fiske, and Hawkins.¹⁵

London was, at the beginning of the century, the centre of a worldwide system of metropolitan political journalism, providing “the ‘live rails’,” as Curzon observed, “for connecting the outskirts of Empire with its heart.” *The Round Table* was the only journal completely devoted to Imperial and foreign affairs. Other journals like the *Westminster*, the *Edinburgh*, and the *National Reviews*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and *Blackwoods* only occasionally dealt with Imperial and foreign policy. The first number of the journal appeared in November 1910, and its print-run was of 3,500 copies, gradually increasing to 6,500 by June 1914. Subscribers were more numerous in the Dominions than in the United Kingdom. By 1918 *The Round Table* had “won an established and influential position” throughout the British Empire, with sales of around “ten and a half thousand,” being the “largest and most widely-distributed circulation of any political quarterly magazine in the British Empire.”¹⁶

Walter Page—American Ambassador to London, and a former magazine editor—believed that the Round Table group was “perhaps the best group of men here for the real study and free discussion of large political subjects,” and that the journal was “the best...I dare say, in the world.” According to *The Spectator*, *The Round Table* in two years of

and *British Foreign Policy 1919-1945. The Royal Institute of International Affairs During the Inter-War Years* (London: Lothian Foundation Press, 1995); Peter Grose, *Continuing the Inquiry: The Council on Foreign Relations from 1921 to 1996* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Kendle, *Round Table*, 65; Lionel Curtis, *Dyarchy* (Oxford: 1920), 74.

¹⁶ James D. Startt, *Journalists for Empire* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1991), 214. Advertising circular for the United States, 1918, RTP, 234.

publications passed “from an adventure into an institution.” If the *Daily Chronicle* thought that *The Round Table* was “indispensable to all serious students of politics,” the *Pall Mall Gazette* stated that there was “no publication that surpasses it in clearness of thought and statement.”¹⁷

Thanks also to the ‘collateralism’ of some historical institutions of the University of Oxford—All Souls College, primarily, but also Balliol, New College, and the Rhodes Trust—and a total control of such ‘quality press’ as *The Times* and *The Observer*, the Round Table was able to exercise, within the Empire, a ‘cultural hegemony’, particularly during the thirty years between 1910 and 1940.¹⁸

The Round Table was not, as the Imperial Federation League, a simple pressure movement inspired by federalist values, but a political organization, with a significant rooting in all the major peripheral centres of the Empire; with almost unlimited financial resources made available particularly by the Rhodes Trust; with a magazine widely recognized as authoritative in matters of Imperial and foreign policy; and especially with a small group of young men who devoted to the federalist cause most of their lives. Two of them, Lionel Curtis and Philip Kerr—the two musketeers, or the Castor and Pollux of the movement, as they were defined by their contemporaries—left the deepest mark in the battles of the movement. “I am only a blade in the scissors,” Curtis wrote to Kerr in 1927, “and cut nothing unless I am hinged with you.” But the relationship was never easy. Curtis tended to patronize his friend ten years younger, who thought that Curtis’s veneration for the Empire was a kind of idolatry. Kerr could not share Curtis’s “transcendental confidence that one is divinely inspired in one’s political operations.” However, according to Lionel Hitchens, Curtis “imposed a spirit into the Kindergarten which they would never have had” without him.¹⁹

Beyond analysis of ideas and dynamics within the movement, the present study aims to provide a new interpretation of events and views which have raised controversial questions within Anglo-Saxon

¹⁷ Page to Arthur W. Page, 25 July 1915, quoted in Burton J. Hendrick, *The Life and Letters of Walter Hines Page* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1922), vol. 2, 84-7; RTP, c 845, 131-4, 175-9.

¹⁸ Kerr to Sir Horace Plunkett, 5 Dec. 1916, quoted in Keith Neilson, “Lord Lothian, Russia, and Ideas for a New International Order, 1916-1922,” in *Lord Lothian and Anglo-American Relations, 1900-1940*, Priscilla Roberts ed. (Danvers, MA: Dordrecht, 2010), 45.

¹⁹ Curtis to Kerr, 23 May 1927, LP, 227/132-4; Kerr to Lady Anne Kerr, 16 Sept. 1914, LP, 464/43; Kerr to Brand, Feb. and Dec. 1912; Hitchens to Curtis, 19 Dec. 1910, quoted in Kendle, *Round Table*, 123.

historiographical debate. The analysis starts with the vital and structural link between the Imperial Federation League, the Liberal and federalist culture of Victorian England, and the Round Table. Everything indeed began at Oxford in 1878, during a famous debate at the Oxford Union on the desirability of Imperial federation. In spite of the fact that the motion in support of the reasons in favour was rejected by fifteen votes against eleven, from that moment the question of institutional reform of an Empire which still seemed to enjoy good health became part of the existence of those young men, who would play, within two decades, a prominent role in the political, cultural, and economic life of the Empire.²⁰

Among them there were Herbert Asquith, Alfred Milner, and George Parkin. There is no evidence that Cecil Rhodes took part in it, but the influence of Oxford’s “mystic mantel of greatness” on the young man who was to devote his immense fortune, accumulated in South Africa, to the University was certainly decisive. In spite of having been created in London, the Imperial Federation League had been essentially a cultural product of Oxford. It is true that also Cambridge—with John Seeley, Henry Sidgwick, and Lord Acton—and the London School of Economics—with its three successive directors, William P. Reeves, William Hewins, and Sir Halford J. Mackinder—contributed significantly to the development of an Imperial ideology, but it was Oxford that exercised the role of the cultural capital of the Empire.²¹

If Parkin was instrumental in attracting the young Milner to the Imperial Federation League, it was William Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, who offered Milner a model of ‘militant’ journalism. He above all provided Milner with the fundamental link to Rhodes, in spite of a crisis in their relationship when Stead opposed the drift towards war of Milner’s policy in South Africa.²²

²⁰ Oxford Union Library, “Rough Minute Books,” 1873-6; 1876-84; Colin Newbury, “Cecil Rhodes and the South African Connection: ‘A Great Imperial University?’” in *Oxford and the Idea*, Madden and Fieldhouse, 79.

²¹ John Flint, *Cecil Rhodes* (Toronto: Brown and Company, 1974), 23; Robert I. Rotberg, *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); W. A. S. Hewins, *The Apologia of an Imperialist: Forty Years of Empire Policy* (London: 1929); William Pember Reeves, *The Long White Cloud* (London: 1898); id., *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand* (London: 1902); Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality. A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (London: Constable, 1919).

²² George R. Parkin, *Imperial Federation: The Problem of National Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1892); John Willison, *Sir George Parkin: A Biography* (London: 1929); William T. Stead, *The United States of Europe on the Eve of the Parliament of Peace* (London: 1899); id., *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil*

Milner had been the link between the two phases of ‘Imperial federalism’, the British ‘old school’ of imperialism (represented by the Imperial Federation League, Cecil Rhodes, Joseph Chamberlain, Lord Rosebery, and Lord Salisbury), and the ‘new school’, represented by the Round Table. Milner drew his power and influence on the formation of British Imperial and foreign policy from heterogeneous social forces of which he was a sort of intersection point. On one side, Milner had in Rhodes the incarnation of capitalist exploitation and accumulation of wealth in colonial Britain. On the other, there was Stead, who offered Milner the foundations of the Imperial ideology, providing a base of legitimacy and perpetuation of an Empire which included within its borders one fourth of the world’s surface and of its population, largely completely subject to the rule of a British Parliament and Cabinet. Then, Milner could also rely upon Reginald B. Brett (later Lord Esher)—a director of Rhodes’ British South African Company, and adviser of Edward VII and George V—who facilitated the rise of the ‘outsider’ Milner into the British foreign and Imperial policy decision-making inner circle.²³

Milner, the chief architect of the Second Anglo-Boer War, and one of the major figures who bear the moral responsibility—on the British side—for the First World War, created the Round Table in order to gain the Dominions’ support for Great Britain in the event of a new European war. Britain’s controversial entry into the Great War could be seen as a desperate attempt to save Britain from a civil war with a political-religious character—the Anglo-Irish conflict, in which Milner was about to take on a leading role, secretly arming the Ulster Volunteers, a private army loyal to the crown—and from the breaking-up of the Empire, without which Britain would have regressed to the rank of a second-rate power. According to this interpretation, Wilhelmine Germany fell—like the naive Boers, allied with the German colony of South West Africa—into a trap skilfully set by the British imperialists to reaffirm with weapons a global economic and political hegemony by then almost completely lost.

Historiography did not fail to highlight the crucial role played by the Conservative Milner in the ascent to power, in December 1905, of the imperialist triumvirate Asquith-Grey-Haldane—prominent members of the

John Rhodes (London: 1902); id., *The Americanization of the World, or the Trend of the Twentieth Century* (London: 1902); Frederic Whyte, *The Life of W. T. Stead* (London: 1925); Edmund Garret, “Milner and Rhodes,” in *The Empire and the Century* (London: 1905).

²³ For a critical analysis, see: James Lees-Milne, *The Enigmatic Edwardian: The Life of Reginald, 2nd Viscount Esher* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1986).

Liberal League—against the 'radical' Liberal Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who was opposed to imperialist and protectionist policies. With control of the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the War Office, Milner and the Liberal imperialists were thus able to obtain, following the premature death of Campbell-Bannerman in 1908, also the control of Downing Street. When Asquith revealed all his inadequacies as supreme war leader and in dealing with the Irish question, Milner and his Unionists allies did not hesitate to replace him, in December 1916, with Lloyd George, at the price of the irreparable split of the glorious Liberal Party into two rival camps, and its final disappearance from the British political scene as a major actor, opening thus the way to the unchallenged hegemony of the Conservative party for more than two decades.²⁴

Since the forced abandonment in July 1905 by Joseph Chamberlain of the leadership of the Tariff Reform Movement—which controlled the majority of Unionist MPs—Milner became the intellectual and political leader of a transversal 'imperial party' which was able to force, at times of crisis, changes to British home, Imperial and foreign policies which were coherent with the defence of British vital and strategic interests. Milner's detachment from Unionist party politics—being able however to command the majority of its MPs—gave him a special role in influencing the decisions of its successive leaders—Balfour and Bonar Law—and also allowed him to negotiate with the Liberals on specific agendas. In this respect, Milner's responsibilities were larger than those of a single man. Milnerism was the dominant ideology of the late Edwardian era, which strongly influenced the British political inner-circle, not just on Imperial and foreign policies. It was Milnerism which 'invented', to a large extent, the 'German threat' in South Africa and in Continental Europe, in order to

²⁴ John Wilson, *CB: A Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (London: Constable, 1973), 426-34, 442; G. A. Farrer, *England under Edward VII* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), 237-45; Sir Maurice Frederick, *Haldane 1856-1915: The Life of Viscount Haldane of Cloan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 154; Peter Fraser, *Lord Esher: A Political Biography* (London: Hart-Davis, 1973), 426; Michael Waterhouse, *Edwardian Requiem: A Life of Sir Edward Grey* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2013); Roy Jenkins *Asquith: Portrait of a Man and an Era* (London: Collins, 1978), 145-146, 154; Keith M. Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente; Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy, 1904-14* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 20, 23; David Dutton, *The History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 15-16; John Grigg, *Lloyd George: The People's Champion, 1902-1911* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 83-88; Michael Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy: 1815-1914* (London: Fontana, 1984), 321-322; Robert Rhodes James, *Rosebery* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), 451.

foster the closer political union of the Empire, and to maintain Ireland under British rule. Once the external menace disappeared after World War I, the Dominions gained full control of their national sovereignty, Great Britain lost Ireland, and had to acquiesce to the process of Indian independence.

The strategic choice by Milner and his disciples to favour the Tsar, rather than the King's cousin, in the creation of a Balkan sphere of influence, revealed itself to be disastrous for the Empire and for Europe. In 1910 Germany was a competitor—even though antagonistic and determined to acquire the status of world power—but not yet an enemy. It was transformed into an enemy, in ideological terms, by Milner and his disciples. In order to stand, Empires feed themselves with wars.

That the Great War could have been avoided is a thesis suggested by a part of the historiography, in the evergreen debate about the origins of the conflict. As in South Africa, which was about the strategic issue of eventual German supremacy south of the Zambezi river, so in the Balkans, Great Britain decided to directly intervene in a conflict aiming to contain the rise of Germany to the status of a great power of global dimensions. British support for the hegemonic ambitions of Russia in the Balkans—in exchange for the inviolability of the Straits and of the Asian borders of the Empire—was the fundamental strategic decision that forever deprived Great Britain of the immense advantage of her insular position. The decision to set up the Expeditionary Force, and to put it at the service of France—and not of India, as originally announced—in a possible war between France and Germany, without declaring in advance the determination to defend the neutrality of Belgium, closed permanently the circle around Germany, making war almost inevitable. In these major choices, the influence of Milner behind the scenes runs from beginning to end.²⁵

²⁵ On the debate on the origins of World War I, see: Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); H. W. Koch, *The Origins of the First World War: Great Powers Rivalry and German War Aims* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Steven E. Miller, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Stephen Van Evera eds., *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Samuel R. Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Niall Ferguson, "Germany and the Origins of the First World War: New Perspectives," *The Historical Journal*, 35, 3, (Sept. 1992): 725-52; M. B. Hayne, *The French Foreign Office and the Origins of the First World War, 1898-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993); Joachim Remak, *The Origins of World War I, 1871-1914* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1995); Laurence Lafore, *The Long Fuse: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War I* (Waveland, MS:

Without the creation of an ‘external threat’, the attempt to bring about the political union of the Empire would have been doomed to failure. In order to survive, the Empire desperately needed the Hun, the opposed, in ideological, political, and economic terms. Without an ‘external threat’ the Empire would possibly have disintegrated before 1914, and the United Kingdom might have been precipitated into a civil war in order to prevent the secession of Ireland. The creation of the ‘external enemy’ was certainly not the only cause which generated World War I, but in Weberian terms it could be considered as the ‘adequate cause’, namely the cause without which the course of events would have been different. The arsenal provided by the joint action of *The Times*, *The Observer*, Oxford and London academic institutions, the Rhodes Trust, a number of imperialist organizations, and King Edward’s entourage, gave Milner a tremendous fire-power which—as shown during the July 1914 Irish crisis—made the difference. Milner’s most formidable weapon was however represented by his young men.

Educated at Oxford, and assembled in South Africa after 1904 with the task of rebuilding the social and political fabric wounded by the war, the future members of the Round Table all came, with few exceptions, from the British aristocracy and the Anglican Church. Back in London in the summer of 1909 after having accomplished—without the direct involvement of their master—the Milnerian design of the political union

1997); Ruth Henig, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2001); Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Zara S. Steiner and Keith Nelson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 2003); Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Gordon Martel, *Origins of the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2008); Roger Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy: The Pre-Dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008); John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?: Britain, the Balance of Power and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009); William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Günter Bischof, Ferdinand Karhofer, and Samuel R. Williamson Jr, *1914: Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of World War I* (New Orleans, LA: University of New Orleans Press, 2014); Geoffrey Wawro, *A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez eds., *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (London: Routledge, 2015).

of the four South African former colonies—Transvaal, Orange River, Cape and Natal—the young men of the so-called Milner’s Kindergarten founded the movement in the Welsh country house of Lord Anglesey, in the autumn of that year. In the space of five years, the movement became, according to Lloyd George “a very powerful combination—in its own way perhaps the most powerful in the country.” The passage of Lloyd George from number 11 to number 10 Downing Street in December 1916 owed much in fact to Milner and his Kindergarten, so that two of its members, Kerr and Waldorf Astor, followed him as his private secretaries. Lloyd George could then witness how each member of the Kindergarten brought “to its deliberations certain definite and important qualities,” and behind the scenes they had “much power and influence.” This was a judgement shared by the *New York Times*, which, following Kerr’s early resignation as Lloyd George’s Private Secretary in 1921, identified in Kerr and his associates the real ‘power behind the throne’.²⁶

From 1916 to 1919 the Round Table played a direct and crucial influence—through Milner, Arthur Balfour, Robert Cecil, H. A. L. Fisher, and Arthur Steel-Maitland within the Cabinet; with Kerr as Lloyd George’s main foreign policy adviser; and with Curtis as leader of the movement—on domestic and Imperial affairs. Their attempts to apply the federal principle to the solution of the Irish question and to reform Imperial relations failed, however, in spite of the fact of having reached the centre of power in London, and having as ‘associates’ Jan Smuts, Robert Borden, William Hughes, and William Massey as prime ministers in South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

On 16 April 1917 the Imperial War Conference passed Resolution IX, advocating a “readjustment” of Imperial relations at the end of the war, “based on the full recognition of the Dominions as autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth and of India as an important portion of the same,” and the preservation of “all existing powers of self-government and complete control of domestic affairs.” The Dominions and India should have “an adequate voice in foreign policy and in foreign relations,” and “effective arrangements for continuous consultation in all important matters of common Imperial concern,” should be made along with “necessary concerted action founded on consultation.”²⁷

Resolution IX represented in fact a mortal blow to the Kindergarten’s hopes, ruling out forever the federal solution for the Empire, in spite of the

²⁶ S. Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets* (London: 1970), vol. 1, 422-3; *New York Times*, 24 March 1921.

²⁷ Halperin, *Milner*, 157-62; Geoffrey Dawson, *The Development of Dominion Status, 1900-1936* (London: 1937), 175; Amery, *My Political Life*, vol. 2, 107.

fact that during the war the Empire had been in fact transformed—with the creation of the Imperial War Conference and Cabinet—into a quasi-federation. It was not just a coincidence that ten days earlier the United States had entered into the European conflict, moving the world's centre of gravity from the Channel into the Atlantic. This was a decision which would have for the British Empire major strategic consequences, particularly for Canada and South Africa. As the war had shown, Great Britain had lost her capacity to lead alone successfully a Continental coalition of forces able to defeat the hegemonic ambitions of the strongest Continental power, and had also lost for ever her insularity, before the coming into operation of the combination of naval and air power. As soon as the 'European' war transformed itself into a 'world' one, the Empire disintegrated.

The end of the Round Table's federal hopes came, however, from fire behind. The irony is that Resolution IX was based on a bipartisan petition advocating a change in Imperial relationships, which the Canadian Round Table sponsored, and which collected more than a thousand signatures. Canada, in fact, had been the crux of the whole Imperial question, and of the Round Table movement. Canadians seemed to reject the extremes of secession and Imperial federation, favouring a less constraining middle ground. The Round Table's federal ambitions appeared to Eddy and Schreuder as a "grand ballet of incomprehension with their chosen collaborators in the Dominions," doomed to failure, and "as hopeless as the earlier British mercantile Imperial attempts to forge a north-west passage through winter ice."²⁸

Abandoning the Imperial federal scheme, the Round Table turned to fostering the processes of Indian and Irish self-government—offering a fundamental contribution—allowing Great Britain to throw, at the critical moment, on the balance of world power the weight of a new Dominion of three and half hundred million inhabitants, and defusing, at the same time, the threat of a 'betrayal behind'. An independent and neutral Ireland would have in fact put at risk—as happened during the Second World War—the security of the Welsh and English coasts.

Although none of the leaders of the Round Table were really convinced of being able to achieve the federation of the Empire—except perhaps Curtis, but no later than 16 April 1917—the Round Table in fact worked to maintain a certain degree of *co-operation* between Great Britain and its Dominions, by then completely independent. In order to preserve

²⁸ Kendle, *Round Table*, 192; J. Eddy and D. Schreuder, *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa First Assert their Nationalities, 1880-1914* (Sydney: 1988), 51, 45.

this strategic collaboration—aimed at upholding the international role of Great Britain as a superpower—the Round Table promoted ‘progressive’ policies in India, Ireland, and Palestine. With the consequent partitions—India and Pakistan, Ulster and the Republic, Israel and Palestine—these policies were the harbinger of civil wars. In order to keep in place some form of post-imperial collaboration, and to be consistent with the ideals of a world to be rebuilt on the “fundamental principles which lie at the heart of Anglo-Saxon civilization”—the construction of the Augustinian *civitas Dei*, in the quite earthly Curtis’s version—the Round Table stamped its permanent seal on a process of decolonization that had tragic results. Since, however, the Round Tablers placed themselves in the perspective of the universal, they assumed that those immediate results were not what mattered most.²⁹

Created in an effort to halt the decline of an Empire which had reached its apogee, and representing the most advanced and well organized expression of British nationalism, the Round Table with its actions produced precisely the opposite results on all fronts, by accelerating the break-up of the Empire and demonstrating how the federalist culture is the exact opposite to the nationalist one. In trying to reconcile opposites—Empire and federation—the Round Table in fact witnessed and to some extent produced the Empire’s crucifixion. And it was just the application of federalist schemes to former colonies which served to speed up its break-up. In the beginning, opposites attract each other, but in the end they exclude themselves each in turn. Hence the widespread phobia for federalism in Great Britain today.

Once this contradiction exploded, there remained however on the field—over the rubble of the Empire, and of the Irish and Indian civil wars—a political culture which nurtured both the European federalist movements—with the birth of the Federal Union, with the federalist conversion of Altiero Spinelli, and with the action of Jean Monnet—and the Atlantic federalist movement, with the long loyalty to the cause by Clarence Streit.³⁰

²⁹ Deborah Lavin, “Morals and the Politics of the Empire: Lionel Curtis and the Round Table,” in *Essays Presented to Michael Roberts*, John Bossey and Peter Juppe eds. (Belfast: 1976); id., “Lionel Curtis and the Idea of Commonwealth,” in *Oxford and the Idea*, Madden and Fieldhouse; id., *From Empire to Commonwealth: A Biography of Lionel Curtis* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

³⁰ The influence of the Round Table and the Federal Union on Spinelli, Monnet, and Streit is discussed in Andrea Bosco, *June 1940, Great Britain and the First Attempt to Build a European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).