Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire

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Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons.

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Like the history of modern paperwork more generally, the career of the English-language book in the age of empire is full of surprises. The embodiment of English manly authority, the book was not simply “a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state,” it was the very emblem of imperial sovereignty—with the rigorous spine a testimony to its singularity, its probity, its titular power. Discussions of the colonial archive highlight the monumentality of imperial volumes—blue books, surveys, censuses, commissions, dictionaries—that embodied the apparent solidity of imperial rule. The King James Bible is perhaps the best example of a book conscripted into an imperial role: a tome conferring the philanthropic gift of Christianity and civilization, it was imagined in some evangelical accounts to be capable of traveling by itself through different landscapes of “palm and pine” and creating a unified Christian empire in its wake. Nor was the book’s power contained merely within its covers. As studies of individual authors like Walter Scott and John Bunyan have shown, the characters and titles from their texts were memorialized across empire in the names of suburbs, streets, ships, and people. Like the wide variety of goods and commodities that made their way through the circuitry of global
market capitalism, books impressed themselves in the everyday lives of imperial subjects, manifesting the formal values of an elite or bourgeois self and modeling in their material form the coherence and commanding presence of British imperial power itself.

Yet for all their pretensions to coherence and stability, books in the age of empire were both less and more than they appeared to be. As the titles we have gathered here illustrate, the book was not always a prefabricated thing, ready-made and unified along a neat vertical axis. More often than not, what arrived between covers was the consequence of a variety of imperial trajectories: upcyclings from pamphlet material or recyclings from scissor-and-paste newspaper clippings—fragments remixed, in turn, through the “geographically disaggregated networks” that constituted the British Empire in its modernizing forms.5 In this sense, the book as we imagine it may be said to be part of a global “paper empire.”6 We seek here to push that concept in two directions: first, toward the book as a material form and a geopolitical influence—a carrier of imperial opinion and authority and a provocation to imperial power as well—and second, away from the book as distinct from or superior to the varieties of imperial print cultures-in-common through which it circulated. Though this seems paradoxical, even contradictory, in fact it is indispensable to any study of books and empire that refuses to fetishize either object of inquiry. It is our collective contention that their entwined histories require otherwise. For the history of books and their imperial careers that contributors to this volume have built allows us to see with particular vividness how and why changes in and challenges to empire were always dispersed events, not dependent on singular, bounded origins or forms but produced by “multiple singularities” that congealed in and against specific historical circumstances.7 If empire was not a coherent whole but an assemblage—a far-flung, reticulate, and vascular patchwork of spaces joined by mobile subjects of all kinds—the book itself was often also just such an assemblage. Indeed, the very category of the book is potentially a red herring. The presumptive spine that unified empire and fixed dissent, the book turns out to be a radical sign of the “chaotic pluralism” of imperial authority and legitimacy, and in the case of this book, times ten.8

Like all books, this book has a multifaceted genealogy. It started as a collaboration between a historian of imperialism and a scholar of transnational book history interested in thinking about how books shaped the modern British Empire, both through the ideas they articulated and the material
forms those ideas took. In our quest for a commanding title ourselves, we fixed on the notion of “ten books that changed the British Empire”—not the ten most significant books, but a diverse set of titles whose influence on imperial discourse and power we could trace through the careers of the texts themselves. To our surprise, among the ten we chose, five had begun as pamphlets and one as a newspaper serial—embryonic book forms that became consolidated between permanent, formal covers as a result of their movement through various circuits of empire. We began to realize that books themselves were not necessarily as self-evident as we first thought: while some started with the purposeful spine their authors intended, others grew from the tumultuous realm of the periodical, the pamphlet, the manifesto, the broadsheet, the newsletter into something else altogether: the canonical—and as Hofmeyr has written elsewhere, the monumental—book form. The influence of these books was both direct and indirect, depending on their form: depending, in other words, on their specific historical iterations in and through the imperial commons they helped to create. Taken together, the ten books in this collection reveal the workings of an imperial print culture-in-the-making that enabled such unlooked-for transformations: a species of mobile imperial commons that took various material forms, of which the book is surprisingly just one.

As surprising to us, in all the various conversations we had about this volume, none of our interlocutors questioned its basic premise: that books could change empire. People seemed quite ready and willing to envisage a series of big books that founded empires (Macaulay, Seeley, Dilke, Lugard) and a set of equally significant books that ended up dismantling them (Fanon, Cabral, Guevara). These authors and their books certainly mark out a historically familiar path from empire to nation. Yet despite our interest in the question of transformation, this collection resists a strictly developmentalist model of historical influence or change. Instead we’ve focused on how books in the age of empire imagined how imperialism worked, assessed how or why it didn’t, and diagnosed what its successes and failures meant for the fate of global hegemony at a variety of historical junctures. So we revisit imperial classics, big books automatically associated with the British Empire dominant, if not ascendant: Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847), Macaulay’s History of England (1848 and following), Charles Pearson’s National Life and Character (1893) and Robert Baden-Powell’s Scouting for Boys (1908). We explore anticolonial blockbusters, texts that rocked the foundations of imperial authority, from their initial appearance
(C. L. R. James’s work *The Black Jacobins*, 1938), or long afterward (Mohandas K. Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*, 1909). And we look to texts that may be less well known, if at all, to students of empire: Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s work *A Letter from Sydney* (1827), the jointly authored *Century of Wrong* (1899), Totaram Sanadhya’s 1914 work *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* (My Twenty-One Years in Fiji), and Gakaara wa Wanjau’s 1960 work *Mĩhĩrĩga ya Agĩkũyũ* (The Clans of the Gikuyu). We do so not by way of bringing these works into some kind of literary canon, postcolonial or otherwise. We see them more as the portable property of an ever-evolving imperial commons: not the kind that moves “from space to space unchanged” but, more precisely, the kind whose mobility reshapes the very form and content of the “book” itself.10

Though we remain attached to our ten books as vehicles for this argument, we focus more purposefully here on the meanings of imperial commons as a site of deterritorialized sovereignty in the textual economy of the modern British Empire. Our use of the phrase “imperial commons” derives from an old term that has recently gained a new life in relation to digital communications (or “dot.commons,” as one writer styles it11). A commons is normally understood as a resource “in joint use or possession; . . . held or enjoyed equally by a number of persons.” The right to the resource is not contingent on obtaining the permission of anyone: “No one exercises a property right with respect to these resources.”12 To put the terms “rights,” “enjoy,” and “joint use” alongside the term “imperial” may seem shocking, since empire represents the very opposite—denial of rights, exclusive access for racialized elites, enclosure and dispossession.

Yet, when applied to textual resources, the term makes considerable sense. Most printed matter in empire functioned without reference to copyright: American reprints, Protestant evangelical publications, official publications, or the extensive network of periodicals that carpeted empire and generated most of their copy from each other, with or without formal exchange agreements.13 Indeed this situation was in part abetted by imperial copyright legislation that protected the rights only of European metropolitan-based producers selling in the colonial market, although colony-specific regulations did attempt to fill the gap.14 The tangle of national, colonial, imperial, and international intellectual property law created an uneven terrain.15 Those agencies invested in copyright, such as large British publishing companies and their associated agencies, customs officials, or colonial states, had limited success enforcing these rights. This confusion created opportunities where colonized elites could strategically deploy or ignore copyright. As Karin
Barber has argued, elite Yoruba writers did at times make use of copyright legislation, generally in relation to books rather than newspapers.¹⁶ Yet such attempts to seek copyright protection were limited, especially in existing intellectual systems and media (whether manuscript, performative, or oral) where the notion that words could be converted into private property made no sense.

The periodical exchange system was especially important in creating a mobile imperial commons. Initially a pretelegraph phenomenon, the system persisted among those who could not afford the steep wire service fees and/or objected to their imperial bias. These interwoven periodicals produce the textual format so familiar to anyone who has worked with imperial newspapers. Any one page will largely be composed of cuttings from elsewhere, each page convening its own miniature empire as snippets from the Calcutta Herald, the Rangoon Times, the Johannesburg Star, the Manchester Guardian, and the Sydney Herald rub shoulders. The juxtaposition of these pieces invited readers to construct their own empire without copyright. Such forms of reading depended on comparison and circulation, with readers juxtaposing different colonies or different imperial systems via a format that announced that it had come from a periodical elsewhere and was more than likely destined for another. This periodical format and its mode of reading constituted a widespread and homemade global idiom and needs to be understood as a demotic form of world literature. This description accords well with Emily Apter’s argument for a lowercase world literature, one of whose characteristics (alongside untranslatability, the burden of her monograph) might be a “dispossessive ethics of reading that challenges the presumptive self-interest and self-having assumed to condition the reader’s relation to cultural property. This dispossessive stance casts World Literature as an unownable estate, a literature over which no one exerts proprietary prerogative and which lends itself to a critical turn that puts the problem of property possession front and centre.”¹⁷ This twentieth-century rubric had underpinnings that were, indubitably, a global imperial commons: not simply a shared imperial space but a densely populated domain with “a miniature empire” convened on virtually every page.¹⁸

As with all commons, access would have been uneven and dependent on wealth, location, levels of literacy. Censorship and colonial state intervention would have constituted another hindrance. Yet, despite these factors, the principle remained that very few property rights existed with respect to these resources. They were textual resources over which one could
exercise a common right. The implications of such an imperial commons are wide-ranging and call minimally for histories of copyright and intellectual property across empire that work from the textual practice up rather than the law down.19 This collection deploys the idea of the imperial commons to grapple with ideas of both book and empire, an intersection that requires us to provincialize the book, the better to grasp its power.

Charismatic Books, Mobile Imperial Histories

Our ten books came in different shapes and sizes, from the slender tract to the multivolume tome. Some were artisanally crafted pamphlets; some started in periodicals or as ephemera, only to rise up into bookness before sinking back again. Working through the capillaries of imperial print culture and colonial politics, these charismatic texts speak broadly to the history of the book and its empire-building capacities from the start of the nineteenth century to decolonization and beyond. Elleke Boehmer’s discussion of Baden-Powell’s Scouting for Boys, for example, shows how its ideas of friendship, imagined initially in a racialized vein, were taken up across empire and beyond and turned into a model of international exchange and comradeship that echoed Rabindranath Tagore’s famously cosmopolitan versions of Indian nationalism. Mrinalini Sinha, in contrast, considers a “humble book,” namely a Hindi pamphlet (Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh) written by an indentured laborer returned from the plantations of Fiji. In its content, the booklet gave expression to a growing desire in India to put an end to the indenture system that humiliated “our countrymen overseas,” as the parlance of the day put it. Having worked in South Africa, Gandhi understood these sentiments and was quick to capitalize on the anti-indenture movement for his own mobilization. An anti-imperial text like the multiauthored work A Century of Wrong, the hasty manifesto that set out the Boer cause on the eve of the Anglo-Boer war (South African war), also worked in unexpected ways. As André du Toit explains, the tract flared briefly, courtesy of the pro-Boer international solidarity movements, but then disappeared, its longer term effects only manifest via the slow violence of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid more than half a century on and beyond, finding echoes in late twentieth-century discussions of nationalism. What came up and off the printed page in the age of empire not only traveled far, in other words; it illuminates, for us, a variety of pathways between texts and power rather than a singular, evolutionary, quantifiable or predictable one.
If each of our ten books tells a story, it does not do so just because it was published or made its way into readers’ hands (or heads or hearts). There are deep histories of composition, circulation, suppression, and even disappearance that these essays track, shedding light on imperial processes not otherwise visible via either a pure history-of-ideas approach or a bottom-up social history approach. Appreciating the materiality of the book, its mobility and its storied career, is critical for the *communicative* history of empire it has the capacity to tell. The emphasis on the book as one particular, if not peculiar, embodiment of an imperial information system is crucial for challenging the “methodological fetishism” of the object itself; so as not to reify it, in other words, but to reinsert it into the series of imperial commodity chains and virtual public spheres whence it came and which it indubitably shaped.

And yet the book is hard to put down or set aside, especially in the age of the e-reader and the tail end of anglo-global empire in which we live. So while our texts are diverse, our method for thinking through the byways and the zones of encounter they sponsored is, quite simply, the book itself: an object and a category that this collection aims to right-size in the context of the imperial commons through which it exercised its power. Books, we argue, need to be placed against the sprawling media ecologies of empire that take shape as different circuits and systems of textual transmission intersected—manuscript, codex, oral genres, writing systems, print. As Tony Ballantyne reminds us in his account of Wakefield’s *Letter from Sydney*, the public spheres of empire depended on avalanches of circulating words, whether lithographed, cyclostyled, scribbled, whispered, sung, declaimed from the hustings, printed in tomes, enacted on stage, or read aloud. By paying attention to these manifold material forms of the word, we can better grasp the big and small ways in which texts act as forces in an imperial world. For all that modern British imperial culture fetishized the book form—that “surrogate Englishman”—in the end it was an imperial commodity, subject to the laws of political economy and the vagaries of the global market, which flung it into often improbable hands with equally improbable consequences, some of which we can determine, some of which are not recuperable even through the kinds of materialist histories we aim for here.

Against all odds, there are some things we can know about the reception of some books.20 We know that the joys and sorrows of transnational intimacies that an imperial book in transit could conjure were felt firsthand
by readers of Brontë’s Jane Eyre. As Charlotte Macdonald’s essay shows, the novel’s imperial “journey”—and the choices Jane’s own colonial encounters pressed on her—was at the very heart of the reader’s experience, whether she resided in the heart of England, stood at the docks of Wellington, or struggled to gain access to the classrooms of 1950s South Africa. There, a young Xhosa girl named “Lily” may or may not have read Brontë’s novel. Indeed, the quest for the sovereignty of the gendered imperial self that it archives had a very long life in the global imagination and lived on through other books, most notably Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea (1966). This is likely what Woolf meant when she said that “books continue each other.” Though she did not live to see it, she would have appreciated Rhys’s extensions and reversals, even if Woolf’s surprisingly obdurate imperialist views would have prevented her from appreciating what Firdous Azim calls “the colonial rise of the novel” itself.21

When books are charismatic, as Jane Eyre certainly is, they outlive their particular historical moment, making history and underwriting historical change beyond, perhaps, what their authors ever intended or imagined possible. This is certainly true of Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj, which, though published in 1909, only exhibited the full force of its political influence decades later, its translation into English in 1910 being one precondition for this subsequent reach. James’s work The Black Jacobins, too, moved powerfully through political time, bringing eighteenth-century Haiti and its revolutionary promise to the heart of postcolonial Third World politics via a form of ideological conscription that may have been sui generis, but that shaped the outcome of postcolonial Caribbean societies in myriad ways nonetheless. As for Pearson’s National Life and Character, his argument about the rise of Asia in world history was nothing short of prophetic, a combination of his own imperial attitudes and his encounters with Chinese in Australia who modeled a decidedly entrepreneurial future for themselves as diasporic agents in an emergent new global order at the turn of the twentieth century. His anxiety about the fate of the “white man” traveled far and wide. Theodore Roosevelt was one of the book’s earliest and most impressed readers, even as he undertook his “imperial turn,” urging intervention in Cuba/Hawaii/Philippines to preempt the vanquishing of the “white man.” Nor is a once and future impact the only way books exhibit mobility. As Derek Peterson’s account of Mĩhĩrĩga ya Agĩkũyũ so effectively shows, some texts have huge influence but comparatively banal lives. As Gakaara’s text moved from prison writing to a book-between-covers, it was incorporated
into an educational system where it was read by thousands of Kenyan schoolchildren, who likely absorbed its moral lessons but scarcely noticed its author. A decidedly downwardly mobile book, it did its transformative work out of sight, in the wake of the violence of empire, in the pedagogical recesses of the newly postcolonial state.

In thinking about books not just as mobile objects but as themselves dispersed events, this introduction draws on the work of Carol Gluck and Anna Tsing. Their collection, *Words in Motion*, treats discrete words (secularism in Morocco, responsibility in Japan, custom in Southeast Asia, minority in Egypt) the way we treat our ten books: as intellectual and political configurations shaped by their movement in time and space even as they shape the historical conditions in which they operate, whether by affirmation of the status quo or dissent from it. What Gluck and Tsing have said about the dozen or so words they have nominated for study, we might say about the books we examine here. “If power pushed some words around,” they write, “others moved by virtue of their own magnetism.” Or: “One way to pay attention to both the cosmopolitan and the regional specificity of words in motion is to consider their materiality . . . [and] the materiality of communication.”22 As Michael Warner has suggested, this entails the recognition that books, like words, are not fictitious, or even simply material, objects. They are themselves material agents: path-makers for the circulation of ideas and discourses and, as such, makers of history in the bargain. Like Gluck and Tsing’s words, we argue that books must be treated as social entities that, in our case, help to bring imperial publics and their critics into being.23

As usefully for our purposes, Gluck and Tsing argue that “words show us struggles over which scales . . . matter.” Books in the age of the British imperialism function analogously here.24 They contained the world of empire by shrinking it between covers, making it highly portable and even proprietary, as those who purchased *Jane Eyre* or owned *Scouting for Boys* might have felt. Books could also scale empire up to epic proportions, as Macaulay’s monumental *History* and—for young men and women, at least—Baden-Powell’s small but sturdy manual were wont to do. Books could also bring empire abruptly to ground, as *The Black Jacobins* did, or sow seeds of anxiety and doubt, as was the case with Pearson. Not incidentally, we are as interested in the plasticity of the book form, the bookish-ness of its becoming, as in the books themselves. In emphasizing its antecedent forms—the origins of Wakefield’s *Letter from Sydney* as a prison scribbling or the
beginnings of *Hind Swaraj* in the columns of a Durban newspaper—we resist the pull of the book as the incarnation of empire, preferring to find imperial power on offense or defense in the fits and starts of its multiple embodiments. We resist, too, a frankly vain search for literal connection (X read Y and then did Z). In these essays, the book form reveals the chaotically plural worlds of empire, where vertical grids certainly operated but where connections were as typically horizontal: “a crazy patchwork” that crosscut core and periphery and radiated influence rather than modeling an event chain of influence or consequence.25

This approach suggests itself in part because the books under consideration here were sites of deterritorialized subjectivity. Though produced in the context of empire, they were a refuge for those who did not necessarily think in conventionally imperialist or even nationalist idioms. As such, they were also a mechanism for deterritorialized sovereignty: a moving object that opened up spaces inside and outside the two covers—spaces that, in turn, allowed for questions about the character of imperial rule, the nature of good government, the urgency of resistance, the injustice of imperial narratives, the right and proper conditions of colonization and settlement. Though downwardly mobile and recessively influential, Gakaara’s booklet encases a key question for the ten books we have brought together here: “Why am I fit to rule?” In his case, the question was endemic to the end of empire: as Peterson notes, “Africa’s patriots sought to surpass their colonial rulers, to project an image of integrity and responsibility that testified to their fitness to govern themselves.” Despite their particularities, the books featured here can be read as both raising and answering this question. They explore diverse ideals of sovereignty, of who should and should not rule, what rule should or should not be—a project that involved imagining the limits of empire, even and especially when the author’s intention was to tout its providentiality or its endless futurity. That most writers strove to express these ideas in books (or the closest they could get to that form) is not an accident, since books themselves were a form of and claim on sovereignty in an imperial context.

*Books and Sovereignty: The Single Volume and the Chaos of Empire*

In the highbrow worlds of modern national-imperial culture, the English book betokens autonomy, authority, and sovereignty. It can exemplify an idea like nation and empire, making these monuments and exemplars of
English virtue, civility, and nation-ness. Macaulay’s book is a model in every sense: it tells the biography of a model nation, it models good governance and nationhood, its portability models mobile Englishness, and as an object it stands as a miniature model of England itself. The History encompasses the scale of empire not only by the vast imperial spaces it maps between covers but by the distance it traveled as well. In a particularly performative instance of this kind of textual entwinement, an advertisement for Cole’s Book Arcade in Melbourne in the Australian media in the 1910s showed a sea serpent stretching from England to Australia carrying packets of books on the curves of its back.26

Small wonder that those with anticolonial ambitions frequently expressed themselves in similarly monumental volumes designed to stand as the counter-current to empire’s master narrative and to circulate among those who wished to curtail its persuasive power. Nehru’s Discovery of India (1946) and Toward Freedom (1941) are suitably epic in both content and form. When C. L. R. James produced The Black Jacobins in 1938, it appeared in a handsome 328-page edition from Secker and Warburg. The back of the dust cover featured a series of companion volumes all in epic vein (examples include The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution; Green Banners: The Story of the Irish Struggle; and Stalin). While not motivated by any straightforward anti-imperialism, Gakaara wa Wanjau aspired to have all his work published in one large volume, an ambition he never realized due to the expense. Today syllabi of postcolonial literature still show a bias toward “the book” in the form of the novel. More popular forms like the magazine or periodical tend to be studied in courses on popular culture. Like the bildungsroman, the book constitutes a proxy for autonomous selfhood.

Peter Stallybrass has traced out the long confessional history of the ideology of “the single volume,” that avatar of universal knowledge that served as the legitimating basis of an immodestly evangelizing imperial mission.27 In Christian pictorial traditions going back to the late Middle Ages, the four evangelists write their gospels in bound volumes rather than loose sheets of parchment, which would have been the extant medieval practice. What they inscribe is already gathered together, consolidated, and error free. The bound volume exuded permanence: it was designed to last and could stand on a shelf (when modern bookshelves finally took shape). The pamphlet by contrast was dog-eared, could not stand on its own, and apparently expressed ideas that were provisional and still in formation. In a more secular vein, Leah Price has thrown light on the affective power of the
Her route into this theme starts in the present. How is it, she asks, that our methods for studying books are so divided: literary studies for the inside and book history for the outside? Why is it so difficult to study the book as an integrated object? Her answer takes us back to Victorian Britain and its particular ideology of the bound volume. As she demonstrates, the novel becomes a singularly popular form: brought freely as a commodity and read pleasurably from beginning to end. The style of reading it entails is important: readers become possessed by the text, forgetting both themselves and the physical book that they hold.

As her ingenious interpretation of the Victorian novel itself demonstrates, these modes of reading sort good characters from bad (a theme Charlotte Macdonald takes up in her discussion of *Jane Eyre*). Virtuous characters are recognizable by the way they read, namely in an attentive and disembodied way. Feckless characters read only fitfully or use books as weapons to harm others, or demonstrate their superficiality by caring for books only as objects of interior decoration. As Price indicates further, the affective hold of the novel is reinforced by its implicit contrast with the tract. The former is actively chosen by a consumer and is read with pleasure. The latter is given away as an object of charity and involves reading as duty. The tract transaction underlines the relative social status of giver and receiver—mistress and servant; doctor and patient; Christian missionary and “heathen”; colonizer and colonized; husband and wife. As Price also makes clear, the glamour of the novel depends on the dowdiness of the tract. Stallybrass likewise calls for the printed book to be parochialized in relation to other print forms. Bound books only ever constituted a small percentage of what was printed: forms, labels, handbills, letterheads, booklets, leaflets, tracts, chapbooks, newspapers made up the bulk of a printer’s business. Yet, however much they may tower above these nether regions of print, hardcover volumes still accrue meaning in relation to them.

For those invested in the monumentality of the hardback volume, the printed book loomed above this landscape (especially in settings where hardback books were relatively rare and expensive). Yet, when we place it back in its habitat, we see that the book was not a self-starter but arose out of and sank back into these other forms. Books are rehearsed in newspapers, periodicals pamphlets, letters, and plays. They travel through reviews, polemical argument, and public debate. They channel and plagiarize each other. The book is always already a dispersed and a *dispersing* event: print sprawled across distance, time, language, and script, carving out pathways
of interest and influence, creating and re-creating imperial events and, in the process, shaping an imperial commons that presumed shared values but also sponsored debate, doubt, critique. These collusions and collisions produced distinctive textual formations across empire that scholars are just beginning to investigate in qualitative and quantitative terms. Meanwhile, it seems highly probable, if not likely, that the book, imagined as a text between covers, constitutes a smaller slice of the market share than the layperson and even the student of empire might anticipate.

Media ecologies—by which we mean the combination of textual and technological environments in which books circulated through empire—were crucial to these imperial textual formations, in which a book of the day made its career. As printing innovations spread across empire, they were taken up by existing institutions and brought new ones into being. Princely states acquired show presses; large metropolitan publishing companies sought to extend their reach in colonial markets, which in turn shaped them; evangelical organizations whether Hindu reformist, Protestant, or Muslim acquired presses that featured as protagonists in their reforming accounts of themselves; colonial states undertook large volumes of printing; private companies whether British or indigenous were a substantial sector: as Ulrike Stark’s account of the Nawal Kishore Press in Lucknow demonstrates, the company employed 350 handpresses, a “considerable number” of steam presses, and nine hundred employees producing material in a range of languages. Africans trained in Protestant evangelical settings established presses often in the teeth of racist opposition from white journeymen who saw printing as the preserve of the “white man.”

Printers moved in and between these settings, producing worlds of conflicted but cosmopolitan print activity. Port cities drew together diasporic printers, whether Indian, African, Chinese, or British, who might find themselves in evangelical presses, colonial state operations, private concerns large or small. Many started their own operations, generally tenuous jobbing presses. These not only undertook commercial work but also printed periodicals and pamphlets in various languages (and scripts) that gave expression to the new sets of transnational alignments that mass migration produced. As many scholars have demonstrated, movements like Sikh internationalism, imperial citizenship, theosophy, Sufism, pan-Buddhism, pan-Islam, African nationalism, Hindu reformism, and ideals of the “white working man” were fueled by small presses and printed matter that linked together far-flung constituents.
At a minimum, this emerging configuration of the artisanal multilingual presses and the periodicals and pamphlets they produced redirects our attention to the themes of the imperial commons and requires us to rethink the proportional role of the single-authored book as the distinctive textual form in the age of empire. Discussing textual formations in Africa, Karin Barber has suggested that the term “printing cultures” may be more appropriate than “print culture” with its overtones of vast, monoglot, anonymous, and impersonal address. By contrast, the phrase “printing cultures” captures the small-scale, artisanal, multilingual operations that produced texts rooted in personalized but transnational forms of address. Often depending on “home-made” or “home-spun” methods (to borrow a term from Derek Peterson’s work), such printing cultures were common across much of empire. Elsewhere in his work on colonial New Zealand, Tony Ballantyne has pointed to newspapers and periodicals as “material and semiotic” institutions that were involved not only in ideology and representation but also in forming a continuum of “materials, skills, technologies, financial arrangements and cultural conventions.” Where books were expensive and rare, newspapers and periodicals constituted a do-it-yourself medium for creating personalized collections and scrapbooks. The newspaper/periodical was a scissors-and-paste affair arising from the exchange system by which consenting publications agreed to clip material from each other. Its cut-and-paste genres trained readers in ongoing comparative and transnational forms of interpretation; its lack of copyright normalized a routine disregard for intellectual property law across much of empire; and its endless circulation of portions of text encouraged a model of the author as editor rather than a creative genius producing sui generis texts.

One famous example of such an artisanal configuration was the International Printing Press set up by Gandhi and others in Durban in 1898, which was made up of personnel from South India, Gujarat, Mauritius, the Cape Colony, Natal, and England. The press offered printing services in ten languages involving seven different scripts (English, Gujarati, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, Hebrew, Marathi, Sanskrit, Zulu, and Dutch). The newspaper it produced from 1903, Indian Opinion, initially appeared in four languages and four scripts: English, Gujarati, Tamil, and Hindi. The newspaper itself was never run for profit and in its later years, Gandhi got rid of virtually all advertising (depending instead on subsidies from merchants and industrialists in both South Africa and India). Instead the paper was dedicated to
furthering the ideals of satyagraha and the rights of British Indians across the world.

Mrinalini Sinha’s account of the world of provincial Indian print and journalism shows a similar picture, with small-time reforming editors running multilingual papers, generally on a shoestring budget. These papers served as hubs for itinerant journalists, traveling revolutionaries, and would-be writers to meet either via the publication or in person in the newspaper offices. Sanadhya’s text emerged from precisely such a setting, where he encountered Benarsidas Chaturvedi, a journalist who took up the cause of Indians overseas and to whom he dictated his story. Derek Peterson’s essay likewise illuminates an African world of small artisanal presses in which Gakaara worked and which he helped establish. Scouting for Boys, too, even though it emerged from the heart of the metropolitan mass media machine, has its own patched-together book history, as Boehmer details in her essay. The comparative informality of printing operations, especially before the high noon of mechanical reproduction, relativizes existing ideas of global histories of print rooted in ideas of print capitalism, the novel, and the newspaper, which pivot on notions of commodity saturation, intellectual property, machine-driven nationalism, and vast monoglot publics. By contrast the small artisanal presses and their products raise themes of philanthropy, merchant patronage, personalized address in a transnational matrix, multilingualism, and variable notions of authorship and copyright.

In the history of print in empire, print-as-empire, all dimensions of the equation remain relevant: there can be no question of either print capitalism/or artisanal “homemade production,” just as there can be no question of the supremacy of the book over other protean or embryonic casts. The material forms in which Gandhi’s work appeared illustrate this point. His first public writing was published serially in 1889 in the Vegetarian; his first work between hard covers, in the 1920s. In between, he produced numerous pamphlets, generally culled from the periodicals he edited in South Africa and India. Hence it took some four decades for Gandhi’s work to rise from the domain of the periodical and pamphlet to that of the hardbound book. This move was not one that he sought: it was rather thrust upon him as his own stature and that of his work gained international visibility. A lifelong critic of copyright, Gandhi resisted the commoditization of print and the attempts by the nation-state to claim rights over its reproduction. He had little interest in producing expensive volumes and across his life largely worked with the periodical and pamphlet.
Given the particularities of his biography, his charismatic politics, and the worlds of print from which his claims to sovereignty emerged, the heterogeneous forms in which Gandhi published may capture the chaotic plurality of printing cultures in empire, but they are not necessarily representative of the paper empire whose histories we are trying to nuance here. Yet if we understand the instability of the book form as representative of the historical conditions in which an imperial commons was imagined and operated, we can better appreciate the book itself as an illuminating dye—at once clearing space for and running through empire’s pathways, consolidating notions of the imperial self in some places, challenging them in others. In light of recent work that throws the British national-imperial legal system into question as the self-directing autonomous export of the imperial center, it is tempting to range the book alongside the law, that inimitable index of English civilizational progress, political order, and self-government. Both the book and the law are exemplary English “goods” that map spaces of extraterritoriality, archive tests of colonial authority and legitimacy, and offer their users evidence of the thin “jurisdictional net” of imperial power on the ground. In this sense, in form and function they each have the capacity to track “the spatial variations of imperial sovereignty” that underwrote global cultures of empire, offering us the opportunity to see its rifts and fissures, if not its cataclysmic challenges as well. As assemblages of a patchwork variety of “things,” the book and the law both contain, in other words, the histories of rule and its undoing, the evidence of imperial legitimacy and its challenges to it. As for books and empire, neither was a coherent or self-contained thing. Each was, rather, the effect of a set of contingencies and collisions with history on the ground: a pair of moving subjects that, together, configure the history of each in new ways.

Recycling and Upcycling: Genre, Author, Owner

The periodical was a key textual institution of empire and furnished a set of intersections, an imperial commons from which new genres, modes of reading, authorship, and ownership could be fashioned. As Sinha shows, Indian-language papers were the first to give public expression to individual experiences of indentured labor by printing affidavits and sworn statements, a genre of personal testimony that Sanadhya in turn developed. In Hind Swaraj Gandhi mapped an old Indic genre of dialogue onto the templates of mass media by creating a series of exchanges between an Editor.
and a Reader that mirrored a newspaper encounter in which the Editor had to speak through the forms of that medium. *Scouting for Boys* exploited the cut-and-paste form of the periodical in a spectacular way, appearing in tandem with the stable of publications of the magnate C. Arthur Pearson, which included *Daily Express*, *Pearson's Weekly*, and *Tit-bits*. As Boehmer argues, the success of Baden-Powell’s book pivoted on the way it enacted a networking of networks, a genre that the imperial periodical embodied in miniature.

This pick-and-mix format encouraged an idea of reading as shaped by circulation. Any periodical was a brief thickening of text from elsewhere, pausing briefly courtesy of a reader before moving on to another destination. Virtually all of our ten books are dominated by such genres of circulation: the letter, the clipping, the résumé, the extract, Q and A, the tract, the pamphlet. Reading formations likewise bear an imprint of circulation. Several texts in this collection depended on international reading circuits for their success. *A Century of Wrong* became a calling card and item of solidarity across boundaries. C. L. R. James’s ideas percolated through cosmopolitan revolutionary networks, reading groups, debating societies, friendships, and feuds. The charisma of both text and author pulsed through these networks. *Scouting for Boys* created the illusion that all scouts, wherever they were in the world, participated in the same text, which circulated yet apparently remained unchanged.

These genres of circulation in turn implied ideals of authorship that were closer to that of the editor than the creative genius. Writing emerged as much from clippings and extracts as from original composition, as Ballantyne’s account of Wakefield demonstrates so vividly. The figure of the editor is present elsewhere: *Jane Eyre* was edited by “Currer Bell”; *A Century of Wrong* was edited by several hands, most of whose owners subsequently disavowed their involvement; Gandhi chose to express himself through the persona of the Editor; *Scouting for Boys* was composed through an almost absentminded gathering of textual fragments.

This figure of the editor finds its analogue in the idea of the tin trunk as a form of demotic self-archiving and mode of composition, as Karin Barber and Derek Peterson have argued elsewhere. Sanadhya and Gakaara carted trunks and boxes of documents with them, often having to practice subterfuge to keep them from the attentions of the colonial state (itself a conscientious and thorough, if paranoid reader). Gandhi was a great keeper of scrapbooks, which traveled with him. Baden-Powell used a metaphorical filing box as a way of generating text.
Editing likewise played a role in constructing ethnic identities. As Pet- terson shows, Gakaara spent his time in a Mau Mau detention camp doing ethnography on the Gikuyu, gathering information on clans and subse- quently editing it into a series of pamphlets on Gikuyuness. In the case of A Century of Wrong, the history of Boers was radically edited, their Dutch origins being excised in favor of starting the story with the advent of British imperialism, thereby turning Afrikaners into an anticolonial and hence in- jured people. The role of editor is perhaps most interesting in Hind Swaraj, where Gandhi sets out his view in the foreword to his manifesto: “These views are mine, and yet not mine. They are mine because I hope to act ac- cording to them. They are part of my being. Yet, they are not mine, because I lay no claim to originality.” As Suhrud points out, in making this claim, Gandhi draws on Indic ideas of composition in which the writer-composer articulates the existing state of knowledge. At the same time, Gandhi also draws on his work as a newspaper editor, wherein most of the text that passed through his hand came from other publications. Importantly, Gan- dhi equates authorship with conduct (“I hope to act according to them”). In this equation, the point of any text is that it can be applied to circum- stances to help the reader to understand them better, and to act with more insight. We encounter this model of reading across the essays presented here: the point of all ten books was that they be applied to present and pressing circumstances.

Today, this mode of reading would be classified somewhat pejoratively as “didactic,” a style that high literary modernism has marginalized by con- structing it as the abject opposite of complexity and irony. Taken together, these essays remind us of how global this form of “didactic” reading in fact was (and indeed still is). By taking an empire-wide purview, this collection supports Leah Price’s parochialization of hegemonic modes of reading that we inherit from the Victorians. As she argues, today still, ideal reading is presumed to be continuous (from beginning to end), to be disembodied, and ideally to have involved book-buying. By contrast, the forms of read- ing discussed in this volume are discontinuous, are often embodied, and seldom entailed a book purchase. In empire, novel and tract did not always shun each other and entered alliances, producing demotic styles of reading that revise dominant assumptions about what reading is.

Such demotic styles of reading were further encouraged by ideas of ownership and copyright, in turn shaped by the model of author-as-editor. Strikingly, across these ten essays, there is no discussion of copyright.
While the “big books” were copyrighted and embodied an imperial order of intellectual property (itself a confused terrain where national models of copyright were awkwardly and ineffectually thrust upon transnational spaces), most of the books discussed here embody an idea of common-right. If books were miscellaneas composed of bits and pieces, then they were texts in which everyone could share and have a share. There was no author who claimed prior ownership. The tracts and pamphlets discussed here were authorless, they were cheap or free, and their point was to be passed from hand to hand. Scouts literally shared their manuals. Gandhi, as noted, rejected copyright, and the first English edition of Hind Swaraj specifically indicated that there were “No Rights Reserved,” a phrase inviting readers to reproduce their own copies and freely share in the book.

In terms of reading rhythms, these essays suggest a variety of tempos: the sedate and solemn pace of reading Macaulay; the urgency of Pearson and A Century of Wrong; the possession of Jane Eyre; the stop-and-start style of Scouting for Boys; the serialization of Wakefield’s Letter to Sydney. Gandhi’s dialogue required pausing and rereading, a mode that sought to turn the haste of discontinuous periodical reading against itself. These rhythms themselves carried implications about time and sovereignty, about who should own the future and how. To read National Life and Character was to become anxious about imminent loss. To read Hind Swaraj was to try and pause industrial time to create, however fleetingly, a miniature sovereignty in the self. To read A Century of Wrong was to participate in an urgent and potentially catastrophic present. To read The Black Jacobins was to anticipate allegorically the independence of Africa—not as a fait accompli but as a process unfolding in real time, in part by building on long histories of powerful, highly mobile ideas generated by and sustained in the imperial commons.

Taken together, these various modes of reading and writing today may strike us as unusual since like many imaginaries, they have been obscured in retrospect by the hegemony of the nation-state. This point is poignantly underlined by the number of tenuous or even imaginary textual sites that emerge from these essays. Gakaara dreamed of running “a big and popular bookshop, where while writing I can deal with selling of books from other countries, be an agent for books and periodicals, school materials, stationeries, sports equipment etc.” The journalist Chaturvedi, whose connections with Sanadhya’s work Sinha mentions, likewise had a daydream, this time about owning a press of his own, supported by a library and news
agency that would serve the cause of “overseas Indians.” In both cases, these imagined scenes place their protagonists in the midst of transnational networks whose import today is no longer fully understood. Similarly in Suhrud’s essay, Gandhi’s ashram emerges as a fragile space in which to practice Gandhian ideas of sovereignty as rooted in the individual rather than an abstract territorialized nation-state. Gandhi’s ashrams were also reading and writing communes, from some of which newspapers were produced. Both Sanadhya and Chaturvedi spent periods living on the ashram Sabarmati, which provided intellectual refuge for those whose projects did not inhere—or find traction—in the imperial nation-state.

**Judging This Book by Its Cover**

What, in the end, is the relationship between these ten books and historical change in the modern British Empire? The idea that books can shape empires is provocative, conjuring the kind of spectacular impact authors always, if secretly, seek when they write books. The rate at which books about empire, especially the British Empire, continue to be produced and to fly off the shelf—whether historical polemic (Niall Ferguson’s *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*), creative nonfiction (William Dalrymple’s *White Mughals*), or historical fiction (Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*)—speaks to a long-standing reader desire, reanimated by the crisis of American imperialism before our eyes, to grapple with empire as a motor of history, if not as the engine of contemporary events and apprehensions as well.

Yet, as we have been arguing here, the ten books whose contributions to the kind of imperial commons we have investigated here are less an engine than a camera. Rather than connecting the dots between a single spine and a cataclysmic imperial event or events, they capture a variety of kinds of historical change, typically over a long time, whether decades or more. Using them as a springboard, we ask how, why, and under what conditions such change happens, what its modalities and delivery systems are, and what the timing of impact is over the *longue durée*. To be sure, books can be preternaturally defiant, taking aim at powerful structures with the intention of fixing them as objects of critique and, with the kind of utopian energy perhaps uniquely propelled by the book form, with the hope of dismantling them in the process. This might be said of *Jane Eyre* or *Century*
of Wrong. Each was motivated by a passionate sense of injustice—about the way imperial political economies shaped English women’s choices and experiences, about how narratives of one violent event threw the whole system of imperial “justice” into question for a nationalist community like the Afrikaners, respectively. The prison writings of Wakefield and Gakaara that gave shape to Letter from Sydney and Mĩhĩrĩga ya Agĩkuũ were also acts of defiance, as was Hind Swaraj, albeit in a characteristically Gandhian way. Meanwhile, the impact of a text like Scouting for Boys can hardly be denied, though its publication was not a singular éclat but a tentacled, snaking pathway of influence on the adolescent psyche, both imperial and colonial. A primer for empire identification and the promise of transnational connection for all those who wanted to read it, its pedagogical career represents the transformation of the imperial ideal from a local metropolitan aspiration to a global phenomenon. As with Macaulay’s History, a genealogy of Powell’s primer shows us the technologies of historical change at work over broad reaches of space and time yet intimately as well, in the hearts and minds of readers who might have no direct encounter with empire otherwise but who became familiar with its plots and possibilities via these big, enduring books.

The same can and should be said of humbler, down-market publications like Sanadhya’s Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh. But how, you might ask, can such an apparently microhistorical work make any claim on imperial history, let alone on the category of historical influence? In Sinha’s reading, Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh is not the exception that makes the rule; quite the contrary. Her account compels us to rethink the direct-hit logic of challenge and influence that lingers even and especially in an age of poststructural and postcolonial assemblage, precisely because she recenters the motors of transformation at the heart of communities of print and politics that are frankly scarcely visible except through a materialist book history like this one. Sanadhya’s book did not bring about the end of indenture. There was no éclat: its work was perpetually dispersed and dispersing. And it looks “subterranean”—below the sightline of empire proper—only with respect to dominant vectors of imperial power and authority, which were not in any case its exclusive or intended audiences. What is truly provocative about Sanadhya’s book is that it gives readers of imperial history an opportunity to resuscitate one of the possibilities of a subaltern method: an approach that emphasizes not just resistance to imperial authority and
its representatives but comparative indifference to them as well. That is to say, the efficacy of Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh lay not simply in its challenge to the vertical spine of imperial power but in its movement through the interstices of the imperial system. Its target was the unsupportable condition of imperial capital, and it operated horizontally against it, snaking—like Baden-Powell’s Scouting for Boys—through the capillaries of that power, making lateral connections to do its work in the world and to achieve what minor success it had. Much the same could be said of Gakaara’s pamphlet, a text indifferent to high anti-imperial registers and written instead in the moral idiom of slow reform.

Those who study, or who otherwise appreciate, the materiality of the book will tell you that titles, like covers, matter. They are like vestibules, staging the inner chambers of the space about to be entered and announcing the design, architectural and otherwise, of what is to come. 46 Like all staging devices, titles set expectations into motion, in this case on the very spine: that vertical axis that organizes the contents and directs the reader toward a horizon, an argument, a monographic set of claims. Echoing objectivist standards for historical change, a book’s title bears the burden of showing, even proving, its accomplishments. For those seeking a literal reading of books + empire = impact, we have one smoking gun. As Marilyn Lake details in her essay on Pearson, the connection between his book and the White Australia policy is clear and direct, practically irrefutable. If it were needed, a case could equally be made for the causative effects of The Black Jacobins, that bible of global revolutionary realization that had material consequences for postcolonial Caribbean governmentality in personnel: Eric Williams was the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, after all. If a post-Enlightenment preoccupation with authorship has distorted our view of the centrality of books (and vice versa), 47 the history of C. L. R. James’s classic illustrates how one book rarely acts alone. As Kamugisha’s essay so skillfully shows, The Black Jacobins was a camera and a catalyst, clashing and meshing with a variety of other books of its time to shape political outcomes in real time and over the long haul as well.

There are other twinnings among our ten books, pairings that suggest that the singularity of the book as an influence peddler should be further provincialized beyond the print culture upcyclings and recyclings we have materialized here. We have already spoken of the forward/backward motion of Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea; Boehmer discusses the relationship
between Baden-Powell and Kipling; and the intellectual slanging matches between James and Williams were utterly consequential to the impact of their work, on each other and on haltingly, fitfully postimperial worlds they traveled in and helped to make. In this sense, reproportioning the book as a multiform commodity, whether via an appreciation of its hybrid textual histories or via its conjuncture with other spindled texts, both mirrors and maps the dispersed assemblage of imperial spaces and places—the communicative empire—that the itineraries of our ten books make visible. More precisely, the travels and travails of the book in/and empire allow us to see how and why the imperial commons we have evinced was both integrated intellectually and perpetually disintegrated by the myriad subjects and agents who constructed, lived inside, and sought to exceed its territorial and epistemological frames. In this sense, historical change can be sensational, but it is also always already immanent and ubiquitous; revolutionary and melodramatic and endemic to everyday writing and reading practices, as it is to quotidian experiences in all their imperial variety and contingency.

The rise-and-fall narrative of British imperialism, which has impressed itself on nearly every spine in the historiography of empire and continues to shape contemporary headlines about “the end of history” in politics and academia alike, does not necessarily allow for this kind of reading. Indeed, aided by the antecedent of Rome, it constitutes both a description of the British Empire’s fate and a method, albeit a limiting one, for historicizing it as well. The tenacity of this arc makes the claims about books and change we are advancing here seem counterintuitive, when in fact they are commonsensical, given, at least, the particular book and empire histories this collection archives. What Kath Weston in another context has called “the long, slow burn” is a much more historically accurate account of how change happens than the drama of rise and fall that has been the explanatory framework for empire tout court. It is no small irony that a study of books—those disappearing occasions for long-form thinking and slow reading—should be one of the most effective ways of dramatizing the limits of the climactic end of empire or the momentous challenge that ushers in revolutionary change. It’s also a testimony to the resilience of books, and of empires, that for all the hype around their disappearance, they are, for the moment anyway, not quite yet in the rearview mirror of history. As we have endeavored to show in what follows, thinking them together,
as makers of an imperial assemblage always in process, still has relevance for understanding how change happens—and for choosing with vigilance and care the lenses through which we diagnose its symptoms and historicize its possibilities.

NOTES


12. This discussion of the commons is drawn from Lessig, The Future of Ideas, 19–23 (quotes from pp. 19 and 20); Eva Hemmungs Wirtén, Terms of Use: Negotiating the Jungle of the Intellectual Commons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).


30. See note 2.


38. Indian Opinion, 4 June 1903.


41. Price, How to Do Things with Books.

42. Seville, The Internationalisation of Copyright Law, 2–6.

43. This idea is drawn from Andrew Piper, Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).


