Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire
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Published by Duke University Press

Hofmeyr, Isabel and Antoinette Burton.
Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons.

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When Charles Pearson’s *National Life and Character: A Forecast* was first published in London and New York, in 1893, its vision of a postcolonial order in which Africans and Asians would take their place as social and political equals in the world caused a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic and across the color line. To colonized peoples, such as the African nationalist Setseele Molema, it encouraged hopes for black freedom.¹ To anxious Europeans it foretold the prospect of humiliation, as pride of race gave way to loss of place.² In the new world imagined by Pearson, “white men” would wake to find themselves “elbowed and hustled, and perhaps even thrust aside by peoples whom we have looked down upon as servile and thought of as bound always to minister to our needs. The solitary consolation will be that the changes have been inevitable.”³

Not many agreed that such a dramatic transformation of the global order, as envisaged by Pearson, was inevitable nor indeed likely. Self-styled “white men’s countries”—in South Africa, North America, and Australasia—resolved to keep such forces at bay by enacting racial segregation on a local
and global scale and implementing ever harsher immigration restriction
measures—including in British countries against British subjects—to
maintain their countries as the inheritance of white men. But these ini-
tiatives sparked in turn fresh political mobilizations among Africans and
Asians and international demands for racial equality, such as that presented
by Japan at Versailles in 1919, demands that ironically helped bring about
the very changes Pearson warned about.

The international impact of Pearson’s book was vividly described, fifteen
years after it was published, in the London journal *Fortnightly Review* in an
article called “Asia Contra Mundum.” The article’s anonymous author, “Vi-
ator” (thought to be Valentine Chirol of the *Times*), noted that “half a gen-
eration had passed since the thought of the world had been startled by the
late Charles Pearson’s theories upon the inevitable decay and fall of white
civilization.” It is a resonant description. Pearson’s book had anticipated
by twenty-five years Oswald Spengler’s better-known *Decline of the West*,
which appeared ten years after the retrospective assessment by “Viator” of
Pearson’s “theories upon the decay and fall of white civilization.” *National
Life and Character* was well known in Germany—one of its enthusiastic
readers was Kaiser Wilhelm, who allegedly coined the phrase “yellow peril.”
When President Woodrow Wilson’s right-hand man, Colonel House, trav-
eled to Germany during World War I, in an effort to negotiate a peace deal,
based on their common Anglo-Saxon origins, he found the kaiser “ranted
on about the demographic strength of Asia.”

It seemed to “Viator,” writing fifteen years after the publication of *Na-
tional Life and Character*, that the book had been “an act” as much as “a trea-
tise”: “It shook the self-confidence of the white races and deprived them of
the absolute sense of assured superiority which had hitherto helped them
to dominate. To Asiatic students, the mental pioneers of the eastern rena-
sance, it revealed what some of them had suspected—that the impassive
forehead of the white man was part of a brazen mask, the mind within being
full of doubt and trouble prone to self-dissolving reflection. The effect was
like the first moment when the trainer’s glance flinches before the eye of the
tiger.” As white self-confidence was shaken, Asians’ self-consciousness was
quickened by *National Life and Character*.

Sadly for Pearson, historian, journalist, and colonial politician, whose
quest for academic recognition had met only frustration, fame came too
late. He died from a chest infection just a year after his book was published
and thus did not live to see the long-term impact of his work or that it went
into several editions, with a Japanese version appearing in 1909 and a final English edition published in 1913. Pearson’s forecast alarmed apprehensive whites and encouraged, as “Viator” suggested, the growth of nationalist and Pan-Asian movements to combat the global offense of the ascendant politics of whiteness. It gave rise, as Akira Iriye has noted, to talk in government and naval circles of a coming war between the East and the West, provoking anxieties that framed the organization of the Universal Races Congress in 1911, called to discuss “the general relations subsisting between the peoples of the West and those of the East, between so-called white and so-called coloured peoples.”

The Perils of Progress

Pearson was an academically trained historian, who early in his career had challenged, at some personal cost, the Anglo-Saxon triumphalism of the leading Teutonic historian, E. A. Freeman. It is worth quoting Pearson’s objection to Freeman’s historical approach, because it provides an early indication of his refusal of racial determinism in history and belief in the inevitability of transformative change:

He is an enthusiast for Saxon institutions, and dates the History of England from Hengist and Horsa; while I follow Sir Francis Palgrave in tracing it back to Roman occupation. . . . Nothing is more tempting than to group all events under a symmetrical theory, and to refer every institution and fact to a Saxon or a Roman original. But the life of a great society does not arrange itself in this manner, and even if the Saxons, when they came to England, made a clean sweep of the cities and its inhabitants, as Mr Freeman seems to suppose, they must, from the very circumstances of a new settlement, have made some changes to the “old Teutonic constitution.”

The author of a history of England during the “early and middle ages,” Pearson had lectured at King’s College, London, and the University of Cambridge, and following his migration to the Australian colonies—but before taking up a career as a radical liberal politician—he had also taught at the University of Melbourne. His forecast of the “inevitable decay and fall of white civilization,” as Viator described it, had two strands—the decline of the West and the rise of Asia—that rested on two distinct historical arguments.
On the one hand Pearson claimed that political developments in liberal democratic societies were leading to the state assuming responsibility for more and more aspects of life, such as education, family relations, industry, housing, and transport, culminating in fully fledged systems of “state socialism,” whose tendencies were evident, in his view, in the colony of Victoria, where “the State builds railways, founds and maintains schools, tries to regulate the wages and hours of labour, protects native industry, settles the population on the land and is beginning to organise systems of state insurance.”\(^\text{10}\) Australia was rapidly creating a “State Socialism,” he wrote in *National Life and Character*, “which succeeds because it is all embracing.”\(^\text{11}\)

These developments, Pearson suggested, somewhat perversely, although valuable reforms in themselves, would ultimately lead to a loss of energy, initiative, and vigor among European populations and a diminution in personal and national character. Life would become more gray, less interesting. Furthermore, as patriarchal family structures weakened, women would seek to limit their families, and the subsequent decline in population would usher in a “stationary state.” As a feminist and liberal, a former principal of a secondary college for girls, and minister for public instruction in the government of Victoria, Pearson was an author of some of the social reforms that had made these changes possible, as his critics were quick to point out. His whole book, the *Saturday Review* charged, was a labored and, to a great extent, successful attempt to prove that

the substitution of the State for the Church, the decay of the family, the equalisation of rights and privileges, the dominance of industrial organisations . . . will destroy character, weaken the interest of life, kill genius, favour only the lower races and individuals . . . ; yet he is imperturbably sure that it was quite the right thing to enlarge the suffrage, to allow a legal status, and practically a free hand to Trade Unions, to impair the authority of husbands and fathers, to abolish class distinctions, to vulgarise education. His paradox is quite different from the old one; he abhors the end, but delights in the means.\(^\text{12}\)

The second strand of Pearson’s argument was that recent progress among “the black and yellow races” showed that their capacity, industry, and population growth would lead them to take an equal place in the world. White men were not destined to rule forever. China would become a great power. India would become independent. Africans would follow Haiti in forming black republics. He was impressed by the progress made by Haiti
after reviewing—and reading against the grain—Spencer St. John’s book *Hayti, or The Black Republic*, published in 1884. St. John, a former English representative in Haiti, was predictably negative in his assessment of Haiti’s prospects, but Pearson used the evidence St. John offered to present a more optimistic view, “though the author assuredly did not intend to convey it.” The fact that “a community of slaves and coloured freedmen should have been able to preserve a centralised government and national unity,” “kept itself free,” and produced exports to the value of 2 million pounds a year, had defied the expectations of those who considered blacks to be incapable of self-government. In a review of Pearson’s essay “The Black Republic,” the *Spectator* praised it as “a perfect marvel in its absence of prejudice or forgetfulness of truth.” His conclusions were “far more favourable to the Haytians than English opinion usually is.”

It was in Asia, however, especially in China and Chinese settlements in southeast Asia, the Pacific, the Americas, and Australasia that Pearson saw the changing world order take shape: “With civilisation equally diffused the most populous country must ultimately be the most powerful; and the preponderance of China over any rival—even over the United States of America—is likely to be overwhelming.” In just a short period of time, Singapore, to Australia’s north, had transformed from a small British trading post into a thriving Chinese settlement. Indeed so remarkable was Chinese migration across southeast Asia and the Pacific that Pearson’s erstwhile colleague in history at Oxford, Goldwin Smith, who had himself migrated to the United States and then Canada, wrote of his doubt as to whether the Anglo-Saxon race would continue to rule settler lands. In the case of Australia, it seemed increasingly likely, he ventured, that the vast “reservoir of industrial population of China” would ultimately “inherit” the southern continent, where China already had “a strong foothold.” “Chinese colonisation of the Straits settlements,” wrote Pearson, “shows what the race is capable of.” The future would see China take “its inevitable position as one of the great Powers of the world.”

Significantly, Pearson had witnessed the international respect accorded the Chinese Empire as a great power at first hand, when as acting chief secretary in the government of Victoria he had joined numerous dignitaries in welcoming the Ch’ing imperial commissioners General Wong Yung Ho and Mr. C. Tsing to Melbourne in 1887 when they arrived on their tour of inspection. They came on a mission to inquire into the treatment of their subjects abroad, their investigation having been suggested by the Chi-
nese foreign minister, Marquis Tseng, who had made a widely publicized pronouncement on Chinese foreign policy published in the *Times* and *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, demanding respect and recognition for the Chinese people “in accordance with the place which China holds as a great Asiatic power.” On receipt of a series of reports from around the world, Marquis Tseng had concluded it was time to protest against the “outrageous treatment to which Chinese subjects residing in some foreign countries have been subjected.”\(^{18}\) The Australian poll tax, introduced in Victoria in 1881, symbolized this unjust and discriminatory treatment. The British Foreign Office advised the Colonial Office, which advised the Australian governors of the planned tour of investigation and asked that the imperial commissioners be afforded “every courtesy.”\(^{19}\)

In *National Life and Character*, Pearson warned in ringing tones of the emergence of a new postcolonial world order in words that would be quoted around the world: “The day will come and perhaps is not far distant, when the European observer will look round to see the globe girdled with a continuous zone of the black and yellow races, no longer too weak for aggression or under tutelage, but independent, or practically so, in government, monopolising the trade of their regions, and circumscribing the industry of the Europeans . . . represented by fleets in the European seas, invited to international conferences and welcomed as allies in the quarrels of the civilized world.”\(^{20}\) It was a prophecy, as we shall see, that drew heavily—in its cadence, sentiments, and language—on the writings of Chinese themselves, thousands of whom had migrated to Melbourne, and who wrote protest booklets, petitions, and remonstrances that demanded an end to racial discrimination, invoked international law, warned of the global consequences of ill treatment, and called for recognition of their “common human rights.”\(^{21}\) The writings of Chinese colonists in Melbourne had a profound effect on Pearson, but the first seeds of *National Life and Character* were sown when he traveled across the United States in the 1860s. An early version of chapter 1 of his book, “The Unchangeable Limits of Higher Races,” first appeared as an article in *Contemporary Review* in 1868.\(^{22}\)

**Radical Reformer**

Pearson was born and educated in England. One of the “lights of liberalism” at Oxford in the 1850s, he earned a reputation for his “extreme Liberal opinions” (in the words of Lord Robert Cecil) and as an eloquent and
skilled debater. In the early 1860s he decided to emigrate to the colonies and try his hand at farming in South Australia, but he was defeated by prolonged drought. Back in England he lectured in support of the higher education of women and wrote an essay in praise of the Australian experiment in democracy for Essays on Reform. He then accepted an appointment as lecturer in modern history at the University of Cambridge, where he joined his colleagues Henry and Millicent Garrett Fawcett in forming a republican club, its guiding principle “a hostility to the hereditary principle as exemplified in monarchical and aristocratic institutions and to all social and political privileges depending on difference of sex.”

In 1868, Pearson traveled, as did many of his friends at that time, to the United States, in part to express support for the cause of the North in the civil war. While traveling across the American continent Pearson had an epiphany: the frontier was closing, and vacant land was fast disappearing. Anticipating Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis by some twenty-five years, he pondered the implications of the closing frontier for Americans and Englishmen who would soon find themselves “cramped for land.” The “temperate zone” was being steadily occupied by successive waves of migrants, from Britain, Europe, and China. Would it be possible for societies to live in a stationary state? He wrote down his thoughts in an essay published in Contemporary Review called “The Land Question in the United States,” which became the basis for the first chapter of National Life and Character.

As a historian, journalist, and world traveler, Pearson had been thinking about changing world forces for some years. He thought about the implications of the greatly increased movement of peoples and transfer of cultures in a framework we might now call world history. He had been amassing evidence for his magnum opus over decades, drawing on his travels and wide reading. In San Francisco he noted the thriving Chinatown and wrote about it in a series of articles for the U.S. journal the Nation. When he arrived in Melbourne, finally to settle, in 1872, he also found a thriving Chinatown, one of the oldest in the world, in the heart of the city on Bourke Street. Tens of thousands of Chinese had migrated to the colony of Victoria from the early 1850s, mainly to try their luck on the goldfields, but also to pursue associated opportunities in trade, commerce, banking, manufacture, and agriculture. Melbourne was a bustling commercial city that supported impressive public institutions, including a public library, museum, art gallery, and university, on whose council Pearson would serve.
Pearson had long worked as a journalist for English, American, and Australian papers, but he was keen to participate directly in politics and entered the parliament of Victoria on his second attempt, in 1878, as a member of the Legislative Assembly for the gold-mining district of Castlemaine. His reform efforts focused on a number of measures directed at extending democratic equality and opportunity. He proposed a progressive land tax; the breaking up of big estates to give small settlers access to land; opening the public library, museum, and art gallery on Sundays; the introduction of technical training; and the extension of free public education at all levels. As a member of the council of the University of Melbourne, he lobbied for the admission of women to university degrees and more generally supported campaigns for women’s suffrage.

**Recognizing China**

In the year that Pearson entered the Victoria parliament, the southeastern colonies were engulfed by a seamen’s strike, called in response to moves by the Australasian Steam Navigation Company to follow the Hong Kong Eastern Australian Mail Steamship Company in employing Asian labor on its Pacific run to Fiji and New Caledonia, at half the cost. Lively public meetings debated the issue in Melbourne and Sydney. A visiting British journalist, John Wisker, wrote about the strike’s national significance for the *Fortnightly Review*: “It was a strike against the yellow man. Thus it acquired a sacred character; it became an Australian movement, securing universal sympathy, and what was more to the purpose substantial support.”

But the campaign against the employment of Chinese did not go uncontested. Three leading Chinese community leaders wrote a defense of their countrymen’s rights to migration and employment in a widely circulated booklet, *The Chinese Question in Australia*, published in Melbourne in 1879.

The booklet’s authors were Lowe Kong Meng, Cheok Hong Cheong, and Louis Ah Mouy, educated men of standing: Lowe Kong Meng a wealthy merchant, Cheok Hong Cheong a Christian evangelist, and Louis Ah Mouy a trader and banker. In their booklet they explained why their fellow countrymen had migrated to the Australian colonies and argued their right to do so under international law. Their countrymen suffered extensively from the consequences of famine, poverty, and civil war. China’s population already exceeded 400 million, and people had heard there was a large country in close proximity that was sparsely populated but rich in resources.
resources. The authors explained that the international treaties enacted between the British and Chinese Empires guaranteed the right of travel and quoted the “illustrious Vattel”—Emmerich de Vattel—to highlight the obligations of reciprocity under the law of nations. They cited a number of universal authorities: Confucius, Thomas Jefferson, the Bible, Mencius.

They also challenged the idea that the Chinese were inherently cheap labor. “Human nature [was] human nature all the world over,” and “the Chinaman [was] just as fond of money, and just as eager to earn as much as he can, as the most grasping of his competitors.” Once settled in new communities, Chinese colonists would quickly adapt to the European mode of living: “Living among people who have invented thousands of artificial wants, and thousands of means of gratifying them, the expenditure of the Asiatic will soon rise to the European level, because his habits and his mode of living will approximate to those of his neighbours.” The authors objected to arguments that Chinese were ill-educated and uncivilized. They were stigmatized as “ignorant pagans” by people who were themselves ignorant, who knew nothing about Eastern civilization and had never been to China. “Are we an inferior race?” they asked. “No one can say so who knows anything of our history, our language, our literature, our government, or our public and private life. China had reached a very high stage of civilization when Britain was peopled by naked savages. The art of printing, the use of gunpowder, and the mariner’s compass were known to us centuries before they were re-invented by Europeans. . . . In the next place, ours is a well-educated people. Indeed, it is but seldom that you could discover a Chinaman incapable of reading, writing and ciphering.”

Despite their protestations, or because of them, the Victoria government moved in 1881 to introduce new immigration restrictions, including a poll tax on Chinese, and to disenfranchise those who enjoyed the vote under the local provision for manhood suffrage. Charles Pearson, MP, was a leading supporter of the legislation: “He had read the Bill with satisfaction, and he considered it reflected great credit upon the Government.” His speech to the Victorian parliament also suggested that he had read The Chinese Question in Australia with some care. He began with reference to the population figure quoted therein, a figure that would become a touchstone in future debate. “The population of China was nearly 400,000,000,” he said, adding that “the mere natural increase of that population in a single year would be sufficient to swamp the whole white population of the col-
ony”32 (a sentence that would be reproduced in the first chapter of National Life and Character).

Another aspect of his argument that echoed The Chinese Question in Australia was his reference to the fact that the Chinese were well informed about Australia. “Australia was now perfectly well known to the Chinese,” he told the Victorian parliament; “communication between the two countries was thoroughly established; and in the event of famine or war arising in China, Chinamen might come here at any time in hordes.”33 Whereas Lowe Kong Meng and his coauthors had asserted that Chinese migrants had just as much a right to occupy unsettled parts of Australia as did the British (“Did man create it or did God?”) Pearson’s thinking on the land question and the limited amount remaining in the “temperate zone” led him to argue that countries such as Australia must remain the heritage of the white man. They were, to use the phase that became common parlance, “white men’s countries.”

The Place of China as a Great Asiatic Power

Six years after the passage of the new immigration restriction legislation that also introduced the poll tax, the Chinese imperial commissioners arrived in Australia to investigate reports of discriminatory treatment of their overseas subjects. They had left China in September 1886 and visited Manila, Singapore, Malaya, Penang, Rangoon, Sumatra, Java, Port Darwin, and Sydney. After leaving Melbourne they would travel to Brisbane, Cooktown, Singapore, Siam, and Cochin China. U Tsing would then take up the position of consul in San Francisco. Newspaper reports about the commissioners’ travels emphasized their international standing and level of education. The “readiness, fluency and correctness with which General Wong Yung Ho expressed himself in the English language” took most by surprise.34

For their overland trip from Sydney to Melbourne, the commissioners were provided with a state carriage and met by an official welcome party at Spencer Street railway station, composed of British officials, including the governor’s aide-de-camp, Captain Traill, local Chinese leaders, including Lowe Kong Meng (who was an old schoolmate of General Wong Yung Ho from the English school in Penang), and a guard of honor consisting of a dozen Chinese dressed in the costume of their country. During their stay of around three weeks in Melbourne, the commissioners were provided with
lavish accommodation in a suite of rooms in the Oriental Hotel, which became a kind of “Eastern Court,” sufficient to house their large retinue of servants, attendants, and officials, who received a daily stream of visitors paying their respects.35

They were invited to lunch at Government House by His Excellency the Governor Sir Henry Loch, who had lived some years in China, and Lady Loch. During the following week they were shown around the public library, the art gallery and museum, Parliament House, the law courts, and the university. The president of the Chamber of Manufactures took them on a tour of the principal shops, factories, and warehouses in and around Melbourne, and they were taken to the wine cellars at Chateau Tahbilk. In the evening of 1 June, the commissioners worshiped at the Chinese temple at South Melbourne and made offerings, watched by a large number of local Chinese. They were visited at their quarters by the political leaders of all parties, including representatives of Trades Hall. On 7 June, they attended the opening of Parliament. Their stay culminated in a banquet hosted by Chief Justice George Higinbotham, in the presence of the governor, who proposed a toast to “The Good Ally of Our Beloved Queen, the Emperor of China.” Also present at this gathering was Acting Chief Secretary Charles Pearson.

For their part, the commissioners reiterated on all possible occasions their objection to the poll tax, “the obnoxious tax” that discriminated against Chinese immigrants. “We should not mind the poll tax if it were imposed on other nationalities,” explained Wong Yung Ho, “but when it is against Chinese alone it seems hard and unjust.”36 In an interview with a local journalist he elaborated: “We should never think of objecting to any laws that were general in their application. Our objection is to laws which deprive us of liberties and privileges enjoyed by other people.”37 From the point of view of the Chinese Empire, Wong Yung Ho told the Melbourne journalist in 1887, “there is absolute free trade on our part; our men and women can go at will; you can come at will; we do not tax you for coming, nor prevent them from going.” The conservative, imperial-minded free trade newspaper the Argus was persuaded of the international logic of the Chinese position, which in its view trumped the local nationalist argument about “the superior rights of superior races.”38 The Chinese demand—“Treat us as others, that is all we ask”—was a justifiable one in the view of the Argus, and it was entirely proper that Australians should “give to others the liberties and privileges we demand from them.”39 Liberties, privileges, and rights should be enjoyed in common.
As a result of the Chinese commissioners’ visit to the Australian colonies and their representations to the British imperial government, the poll tax was dropped, but the determination of colonial political leaders to exclude Chinese migrants through more stringent immigration restrictions strengthened. At a conference in Sydney in 1888 they agreed to enact uniform legislation to achieve this end. When the resulting legislation was introduced into the Victoria parliament, Pearson was again one of its strongest supporters. By 1888 he had formulated the issue of immigration restriction as one of national sovereignty, the right of a self-governing, “free and independent state” to self-preservation. When his old friend the liberal William Shiels spoke in defense of “the best traditions of freedom, which we inherited from the mother country,” Pearson responded: “I look upon it as important not so much to the personal liberty of aliens as to the national existence of the whole people of Victoria. That is what is really at stake.”

As Adam McKeown has pointed out, the justification by settler countries of immigration restriction in terms of national sovereign rights—and conversely the definition of sovereignty as a matter of border control—set an example for the modern globalized world.

Victoria’s new immigration restriction legislation departed from tradition in ignoring the special status accorded to British subjects across the empire. As Victoria’s premier, Duncan Gillies, explained: “The existing law provides that Chinese who are naturalized British subjects shall be exempt from its operation, and in consequence of that, the Chinese of Hong Kong have been able to come here; but those people, although naturalized British subjects, are still Chinese, and therefore are as objectionable as if they were to come from the centre of China.” Chinese community leaders in Australia were outraged by these new developments and protested against them in a series of letters, petitions, and remonstrances that were given further publicity when published in newspapers and discussed in Parliament. They continued to insist on recognition of the Chinese as a civilized people and China’s coming greatness as a modern power.

At the 1888 conference in Sydney, in an address titled “Address to the Representatives of the Australian Governments, in Conference Assembled,” Cheok Hong Cheong, on behalf of Louis Ah Mouy, Shi Green, Sun Suey Shing, and James Moy Ling, warned of the possible consequences of continuing Australian insult. Did not Australians realize the foolishness of giving offense to a nation that was surely destined for greatness? “Our own land has no equal on earth for fertility and resources which by and by will
cause her to weight heavy in the scale of nations.” Evil treatment would bear bitter fruit, and wounds would fester. “A time may come,” they warned, in language that would echo five years later in *National Life and Character*, “nay, probably will come sooner than is supposed, when the presence and power of China as a great nation will be felt in these seas, and it lies with you to say, as wise men or otherwise, if this be for good or evil.”

Cheok Hong Cheong’s warning subsequently became the subject of lively debate in the Victoria parliament. “Here was an extraordinary sentence,” said David Gaunson, lawyer and member for Emerald Hill, “a sentence of absolute downright meaning—a sentence of unmistakable and pregnant importance.” “As soon as the Chinese were induced to avail themselves of the practical appliances of western civilization,” he suggested, in an idea that Pearson would make his own, “Chinese merchants would take their maritime commerce into their own hands, and dictate prices in London as they were already doing at Hangshow and Shanghai. As a matter of fact, in the Philippines, and in the other islands of the great Australian archipelago, Chinese merchants were practically running British merchants clean out of existence.” Moreover, Gaunson continued, “China now possessed a more powerful fleet than Great Britain could command in Australasian waters; and . . . if the Russians and the Chinese were to coalesce, the position of Australasia would be disastrous in the extreme.” Pearson, then minister for public instruction, took note. Both Cheok Hong Cheong’s warning—“a time may come”—and Gaunson’s arguments in the Victorian parliament about the international implications of Chinese commercial power were incorporated into his famous passage of prophecy. *National Life and Character* can be seen, then, as an imperial coproduction, in Antoinette Burton’s terms: an outcome of the encounter between subjects of the British and Chinese Empires in Australia.

“Strikingly Original”: The Reception of *National Life and Character*

Pearson’s book impressed its British readers as “strikingly original.” It was, said reviewers, “remarkable,” “novel,” “disturbing,” “extremely disquieting.” Its forecast took most quite by surprise, as he alerted his readers to the “rise of Asia” more than one hundred years before that phrase became a cliché of our own times. One of his most thoughtful reviewers, writing in 1893 in the *London Athenaeum*, noted the significance of Pearson’s geo-
graphical perspective to his forecast, the distinctiveness of his “Australian point of view”: “The forecast will take many by surprise, because the view it presents is not only not fashionable, but is fundamentally different from that which we have been accustomed since ‘progress’ became a catchword among us. . . . In another respect, too, he quits the beaten track of anticipation. His view is not purely or mainly European, nor does he regard the inferior races as hopelessly beaten in the struggle with Western civilisation.” “The reader,” the Athenaeum noted, “can indeed discern that Mr Pearson’s point of view is not London or Paris, but Melbourne.” “He regards the march of affairs from the Australian point of view, and next to Australia what he seems to see most clearly is the growth of Chinese power and of the native populations of Africa. In this forecast, in fact, Europe loses altogether the precedence it has always enjoyed. It appears here as not only the smallest, but as the least important continent.”47 Pearson’s view was not only unfashionable, as the reviewer suggested, but fundamentally at odds with the British triumphalism popularized in the last decades of the nineteenth century by the several editions of Charles Dilke’s Greater Britain and J. R. Seeley’s Expansion of England.48 Indeed one Australian Britisher, W. H. Fitchett, writing in the Review of Reviews, angrily accused Pearson of being a traitor to his race for refusing to admit the “superiority” of the Anglo-Saxon and for expecting his own people “to vanish before a procession of coffee-coloured, yellow tinted or black-skinned races.”49

Pearson’s prognostications were also at variance with the racial determinism of Benjamin Kidd’s Social Evolution, published just one year after National Life and Character. The two books were often reviewed together, with their contrasting arguments noted. Whereas Pearson pointed to the equal prospects of the “black and yellow races,” Kidd argued that they must remain subordinate for all time. As Llewellyn Davies, writing in a review in the Guardian titled “Are All Men Equal?” pointed out:

Both these authors have something prophetic to say about relations of the Western and more civilised races to the less civilised; and their forecasts are in curious contrast to each other. Mr Pearson sees the Chinese, the races of the Indian peninsula, the Negroes, all increasing round the European races, and threatening to squeeze them into anaemic languor: Mr Kidd sees the Teutonic races, because they surpass other races in reverence and a sense of duty, tending to rule the whole earth. And instead of having fanciful notions as to the equality
or equal rights of inferior races, he sets himself to argue us out of any such notions.50

Across the Atlantic, Theodore Roosevelt also expressed doubts about Pearson’s claims as to the capacity of blacks, Chinese, and Indians, and like other readers he was unsettled by Pearson’s forecast. Roosevelt reviewed National Life and Character at length in Sewanee Review and wrote to tell Pearson of the “great effect” of the book on “all our men here in Washington.” “They were greatly interested in what you said. In fact, I don’t suppose that any book recently, unless it is Mahan’s ‘Influence of Sea Power’ has excited anything like as much interest.” It encouraged Roosevelt in his imperial turn of the mid-1890s.51

In the United States the publication of The Influence of Sea Power and National Life and Character at much the same time shaped the reception and reading of both texts. Together they increased discussion of a coming war between the East and West for worldwide supremacy. In 1893, the same year Pearson’s book was published, Mahan wrote an essay titled “Hawaii and Our Future Sea Power” in which he called for an American takeover of the Pacific Islands because of their strategic value as a coaling station: “Shut out from the Sandwich Islands as a coal base, an enemy is thrown back for supplies of fuel to distances of thirty-five hundred miles.”52 The Pacific Ocean began to be seen as the site of the coming war between the East and the West. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Hawaiian monarchy had been overthrown and the islands annexed by the United States. The war against Spain saw the Philippines pass into American control.

Pearson’s forecast of Chinese power was popularized in a number of alarmist plays and novels that were published from the 1890s, most notably M. P. Shiel’s novel The Yellow Danger, which appeared in 1898.53 Some contemporary critics described this novel as a fictionalization of Pearson’s book, and Shiel’s Asian villain, Dr. Yen How, has been seen as a possible basis for Sax Rohmer’s much better known Dr. Fu Manchu. As Sascha Au-erbach has noted, these novels spoke to the perceived threat of a resurgent China, and it is not surprising that National Life and Character was also re-published in London in 1913 in response to the new sense of crisis about the Chinese in Britain itself.54

In Australia, Pearson’s book had a direct influence on political leaders and policy formation at the highest level. In 1901, when the new Australian prime minister, Edmund Barton, rose to speak in the first federal Parlia-
ment in support of the Immigration Restriction Bill, aimed at excluding all “Asiatics” from the new Commonwealth, he cited “Professor Pearson,” “one of the most intellectual statesman who ever lived in this country,” as the “strong authority” whose writings gave legitimacy to the legislation. Pearson had been dead for seven years when Barton held his book high in Parliament and read two passages from it. In the first, he interpolated his own comment to emphasize the difference in circumstances between Australia and Britain:

The fear of Chinese immigration which the Australian democracy cherishes, and which Englishmen at home find it hard to understand—(naturally because they have never had the troubles we have had)—is, in fact, the instinct of self-preservation quickened by experience. We know that coloured and white labour cannot exist side by side; we are well aware that China can swamp us with a single year’s surplus of population; and we know that if national existence is sacrificed to the working of a few mines and sugar plantations, it is not the Englishman in Australia alone, but the whole civilized world that will be the losers.55

Barton then read Pearson’s famous passage of prophecy, its cadence and content echoing Cheok Hong Cheong’s warning of 1888 and the subsequent discussion in the Victorian Parliament:

The day will come, and perhaps is not far distant, when the European observer will look round to see the globe girdled with a continuous zone of the black and yellow races, no longer too weak for aggression or under tutelage, but independent or practically so in government, monopolizing the trade of their own regions, and circumscribing the industry of the Europeans . . . represented by fleets in the European seas, invited to international conferences, and welcomed as allies in the quarrels of the civilized world. . . . It is idle to say that if all this should come to pass our pride of place will not be humiliated.56

Pearson the historian saw these historic changes as inevitable. Prime Minister Barton the politician asked, rather: “Is that not something to guard against?” This was the aim of the government’s White Australia policy: to guard against being “elbowed and hustled, and perhaps even thrust aside by peoples whom we have looked down upon as servile”; to guard against the prospect of racial humiliation. The policy’s central plank of immigration

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restriction would be emulated in the following decades in other British Dominions—White Canada and White New Zealand—as well as in the republic of the United States, where Lothrop Stoddard, author of *The Rising Tide of Colour*, who referred to Pearson’s book as “epoch-making,” was a key lobbyist for the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924.57

**The East May Now Repel the West**

In 1905, the Japanese victory over Russia at Tsushima seemed to dramatically confirm Pearson’s prediction of the rise of Asia, though his focus, in 1893, had been on the power of China, not Japan. He had not lived to see the Japanese military defeat of China in 1895, or predicted the startling rise of Japan as a modern military power, but even so, the meaning of Japan’s shocking defeat of a European power was understood in the discursive framework provided by Pearson’s prophecy, read by so many as the prediction of a coming race war between East and West and a struggle between white and nonwhite peoples for global dominance. Across the world there was tremendous excitement with the Japanese victory, which was proclaimed by colonized and colored peoples including African, Chinese, and Indian political leaders as a triumph of “the down-trodden Eastern peoples.”58

European statesmen and theorists also hailed the significance of Japan’s victory. Goldwin Smith, by then settled in Canada, wrote to Lord Rosebery: “How far will Japan go? The East may now repel the West. No more spheres of influence for predatory Powers. What is the ultimate outlook for Australia or even for the British Empire in India?”59 At Oxford, Alfred Zimmern, lecturer in classics and future internationalist, told his class he was setting aside Greek history that morning, explaining: “I feel I must speak to you about the most important historical event which has happened or is likely to happen in our lifetime, the victory of a non-white people over a white people.”60 And even Gandhi applauded the fact that the Japanese had forced Russia to “bite the dust on the battlefield”: “The peoples of the East will never, never again submit to insult from the insolent whites.”61 At the end of 1905 his magazine *Indian Opinion* published an extract from Pearson’s prophecy under the heading “A Word for Londoners.”62 It had been supplied, perversely, by L. E. Neame, who later published *The Asiatic Danger in the Colonies* (with Pearson’s prophecy as his preface) to urge the imperial government to “support the Colonies in the ideal of a White Man’s Country.”63
This was the historical context, created by the repercussions of Japan’s defeat of Russia, in which “Viator” wrote his long, reflective article “Asia Contra Mundum” in *Fortnightly Review*. Recent events had “re-opened the colour conflict along the whole line of European and Asiatic relations” and called to mind the strange predictions of Charles Pearson, “that disquieting thinker.” Fifteen years after *National Life and Character* appeared, it appeared to “Viator” to be a “more extraordinary book than when it was written. We must admit there was more truth in it than the great majority believed. We must admit that there was more truth in it than almost anyone believed.”

It had also become clear that *National Life and Character* was in some ways a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating the very future it warned about, with “Anglo-Saxon democracies throughout the world, whether expressed by yellow elections in [Britain], by race-riots upon the Pacific slope, or by restrictive Immigration Laws in the Commonwealth and the Transvaal, galvanizing the political unity of India and the fighting unity of Asia.”

The imperial government, concluded “Viator” in 1908, would surely be forced to choose between its white self-governing democracies, who couldn’t be forced to “commit social suicide in the name of justice to Asia,” and “the utter alienation of all the races in our Eastern dependency.”

Britain was being forced to betray its promise of equality and freedom for all British subjects as increasingly the divide between white colonies and others deepened. To ameliorate this betrayal, “Viator” suggested that the creation of a “brown man’s country” in British East Africa might provide a solution to the Indian desire to emigrate and “strengthen our moral and strategical hold on India itself.” If white men persisted, however, in trying to exclude nonwhites from four of the five continents, then Pearson’s vision might well come to pass:

Let the sense of the common grievance rise steadily and dominate; let it be asserted that there shall be white men’s countries in every other Continent, but that brown men and yellow men, no matter how much they increase or how far they progress, shall never have any countries but their own; let the conception of *Asia contra mundum* gradually arouse all its races for a colossal crusade; let Japan be invoked by China as a leader and by India as a liberator and let the black races feel that the white man is like to be swept back at last; and then indeed the strangest dreams of the eclipse and extinction of Western civilisation might come true.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have pointed to evidence of the widespread impact of Charles Pearson’s unsettling predictions of a postcolonial world order in which the “black and yellow races” would take their place as the equals of “white men,” predictions that became in some ways a self-fulfilling prophecy, as “white men’s countries”—from southern Africa to northern America and to Australasia—proceeded to enact global policies of racial segregation while colonized and colored peoples mobilized in turn to demand racial equality, national independence, and an end to white men’s rule. Though arguing against racial determinism, *National Life and Character* nevertheless made the binary divide between whites and nonwhites, Europeans and “Asiatics,” East and West central to understanding changing world forces.

Pearson was not an advocate of racial science or social Darwinism but a student of political history, who saw the future power of Asia in world affairs as an inevitable development. And although he used the terms “lower and higher races” to explicate his argument, he was careful to explain that this did not signify a belief in innate racial inferiority and superiority. When Benjamin Kidd, a believer in Teutonic superiority, finished writing *Social Evolution* just after *National Life and Character* appeared, he read Pearson’s book and its early reviews before his own was printed and was moved to add a long footnote, criticizing Pearson for “the serious mistake” of “estimating the future by watching the course of events outside the temperate regions” rather than attending to “the progress amongst the Western peoples.” In other words, Pearson had made the mistake of treating the “black and yellow races” as historical agents capable of shaping their own future and taking an equal place in the world.67

The racial determinism of books such as Kidd’s *Social Evolution* would serve as a powerful weapon for those who wanted to prove Pearson’s predictions wrong and that his views of the capacity of the “black and yellow races” were misplaced. Racial determinists helped ensure that the future equality and independence of blacks and Asians, foretold by Pearson as “inevitable,” would be resisted for many decades to come. Ironically, however, Pearson’s prophecy also helped make race thinking central to discussions of imperial and international relations and gave currency to predictions of a coming war between white and nonwhite, the East and the West. *National Life and Character*’s legacy was to constitute “whiteness” not as a source
of superiority but as a condition of anxiety fueled by apprehension of imminent loss.

NOTES


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32. Victorian Legislative Assembly, *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, 4 October 1881, 220.
34. Argus, 27 May 1887.
35. Argus, 28 May 1887.
36. Argus, 28 May 1887.
37. Argus, 28 May 1887.
38. Argus, 30 May 1887.
39. Argus, 30 May 1887.
42. Legislative Assembly, *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, 6 December 1888, 2357.
43. Cheok Hong Cheong, “Address to Australasian Conference: To the Representatives of Australian Governments, in Conference Assembled,” in Cheok Hong Cheong
et al., *Chinese Remonstrance to the Parliament and People of Victoria, together with Correspondence with Government of the Same, and Address to Sydney Conference* (Melbourne: Wm. Marshall and Co., 1888), 15.

44. Legislative Assembly, *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, 18 October 1888, 1617.

47. *Athenaeum*, 4 March 1893.


60. Lake and Reynolds, *Global Colour Line*, 166.