

## Decolonization and Britain's Attempt to Reform Imperial and Commonwealth History Education, 1955–1958

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### [Abstract]

The loss of prestige that Britain suffered as a result of World War II brought about an end to the hegemony of British history in the history curriculum of the Empire, although the immediate postwar history curriculum for Britain remained predominantly Anglo-centric. In early 1956 the British Commonwealth Relations Office and the Ministry of Education decided to hold a conference course attended by Commonwealth history professors and school teachers during the summer of 1957 to devise plans for British students to take more interest in Commonwealth history. However, the government discovered that the Royal Empire Society, the leading members of which were Commonwealth history experts whose advice the government needed, was planning to hold its own conference without government participation. In return for cooperating with the government's plans, the Royal Empire Society demanded that the government's conference course not be overseen by a rival body, the Imperial Institute, and that a 'British Commonwealth Trust' be established to oversee exchange programs between Britain and the Commonwealth. The Imperial Institute was subsequently dropped as the conference organizer, but the Royal Empire Society still pulled out of supporting the government's conference course when no

progress was made on the establishment of the British Commonwealth Trust. With no clear expert available to supervise the organizing and running of the conference, the government's plans soon fizzled out and no further attempt to strengthen Commonwealth history education in British schools were made.

**Key Words: British Empire, Commonwealth, history education, Imperial Institute, Royal Empire Society**

## 1. Introduction

Britain's decision on 23 June 2016 to leave the European Union (EU) – colloquially known as 'Brexit' – has since brought forth a barrage of comments from prominent anti-EU figures who have compared Europe to the colonial powers of the imperialist era. Ann Widdecombe, a former Conservative government minister who ran as a candidate for the Brexit Party in the May 2019 European Parliament elections and won, compared Brexit with “slaves rising up against their owners” and “colonies against their empires” (Stone 2019). Boris Johnson, Britain's new Prime Minister, also commented upon Britain's supposed “status of colony” of the EU, while also saying that the “problem” with Africa was “not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge any more” (Poole 2018).

These kinds of inappropriate and offensive reminiscences of empire and imperial rule by those amongst the ruling elite went virtually unchallenged in British society “because the stark fact remains that most Britons know very little about the history of the empire itself, still less the way in which its long afterlife profoundly shapes both Britain and the wider world today” (Gopal 2019). As such, think-tanks such as

the Runnymede Trust have called for the teaching of the intertwined histories of empire and migration to be made compulsory in British secondary schools as migration and empire “are not marginal events: they are central to [Britain’s] national story. As it stands the story we are telling is incomplete” (Weale 2019).

History education in the classroom has always been regarded as being essential in the improvement of relations between different communities (cf. Smith 95), and given Britain’s current attempts to foster closer relations with the wider Commonwealth in order to make up for her departure from Europe (cf. Rudd 2019), the study of Britain’s historical ties with her former possessions throughout the globe has become all the more relevant and important. Therefore, it cannot but be ironic to see that currently only “just 4% of pupils taking the [General Certificate of Secondary Education examination in] history choose the “migration to Britain” option, which also covers the topic of the British empire“ (Weale 2019).

This disinterest in the history of the British Empire and the Commonwealth in the British classroom is by no means a recent phenomenon: Britain’s postwar history curriculum has traditionally been primarily concerned with teaching British political history in chronological order for the student to memorize with the primary purpose of stirring up patriotism (Kim 209). This is all the more puzzling when one observes the fact that, until Britain’s entry into the European Economic Community in the early 1970s, Britain had enormous interest in strengthening her relations with the Commonwealth as it was seen as one of the key features to Britain’s claim to great power status in the postwar world (Gowland 274). At a time when the postwar dissolution of empire was threatening to bring down Britain’s once-lofty position on the global stage, it is inconceivable to imagine that the British authorities had not endeavored to better educate the young minds of Britain in the way of understanding the history and society of their Commonwealth brethren in order to consolidate the

ties that bound Britain's imperial legacies together and thus allow Britain to punch above her weight in the international arena for as long as it was possible.

However, there is little academic research which analyzes postwar Britain's policy on commonwealth history education. James Mangan's edited work on British education in the context of imperial policy is confined to the period before World War II, while David Cannadine's text on British history education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century makes almost no mention of the British government's policy towards educating imperial and Commonwealth history in the immediate postwar years. This is a critical gap within the existing research which needs to be filled not only because of the more complete picture of 20<sup>th</sup> century British history education policy that such a study will provide, but also because of the lessons that can be drawn from such an analysis which could contribute to the improvement of history education in Britain today. As such this article, after examining the state of history education in the British Empire before and immediately after World War II with particular reference to Britain, Malaya and Singapore, will examine Britain's immediate postwar policy of imperial and Commonwealth history education and its consequences by using declassified government papers produced by the then Commonwealth Relations Office, Colonial Office and the Ministry of Education.

## 2. History Education in the British Empire Before World War II

Up until the early 20th century, the history that was taught in English schools had little to do with the history of the British Empire: the focus of the history curriculum in England was on how the English nation was formed. The reason for this was that

“in a tense phase of imperial expansion and international rivalry, it was considered essential to instil into the populace, while at their most impressionable age, a shared sense of national identity, national loyalty and pride” (Cannadine 19), and to that end, “in order to raise national consciousness, knowledge of national history was deemed of first importance, and the classroom was regarded as the place to instil it” (Blackburn 16). This was a policy which was not restricted within the educational confines of the mother country, but was applied throughout the wider Empire as was the common practice of the time (cf. Whitehead 224). In the case of Malaya and Singapore, for example, a centralized history curriculum that was established in 1899 by the colonial authorities mirrored the history curriculum in England by ensuring that students at age of 8 and 9 (classified as Standards I and II) would learn twenty biographies or important events in English history from the Roman invasion to Henry VII, and then at age 10 and 11 (classified as Standards III and IV) would study thirty biographies or important events in English history from the Norman Conquest to the end of the Wars of the Roses (Blackburn 15). These students would then go on to learn in-depth about the Tudor period at age 12 (Standard V), the Stuart period at age 13 (Standard VI), and the Hanoverian period with particular reference to the acquisition of colonies at age 14 (Standard VII) (Blackburn 16-17). Such a curriculum conformed to the so-called ‘Great Man theory’, which held that the lives of great individuals, rather than social or economic forces, shape history. This approach to the teaching of history was regarded as highly useful in educating the future leaders of Empire as these ‘Great Men’ in English history became “imperial heroes” whose lives “served to explain and justify the rise of the imperial state, personified national greatness and offered examples of self-sacrificing service to a current generation” (MacKenzie 114). As such, despite the criticism that such a curriculum was “at best conventional and at worst antiquated” (Beales 5) and the

suggestions that history classes given to colonial students should be made “more useful to the colonial administration by explaining the expansion of the British Empire” into areas such as Malaya and Singapore (Blackburn 17), the history curriculum of the British Empire remained unchanged until the end of World War I.

The political and social impact of the Great War brought about a meaningful change of direction concerning the history curriculum of Britain and the Empire. Before World War I, the objective of teaching English history to all students of the empire was to “create an imperial citizenship” which were really “efforts to integrate cultural, social and political identities” of the empire “within a broader *imperial* identity” (Gorman 1). But as the “war experience had increased self-confidence within each Dominion” of the Empire (Clayton 5), so were the ideas of “civil rights, racial equality, and national self-determination, largely foreign to the mentality of the pre-1920 imperial world ... incorporated into subsequent understandings of citizenship” (Gorman 212). With the idea of ‘imperial citizenship’ having been changed from simply belonging to the Empire to having certain rights as a member of the Empire, it was prevailed upon the history curriculum to inform the subjects of the Empire of their rights and duties. To this end, “emphasis on international history and cooperation among nations was recommended [which went on to] prompt renewed attention to how the empire was explained to children” (Yeandle 159). The ultimate goal was to “teach Empire, not imperialism” since “the temper of the times [was] wholly unfavourable to work of a [nationalist] propagandist nature” (Yeandle 161).

The new postwar conception of ‘imperial citizenship’ and the subsequent change of direction in Britain’s history education meant that the colonies were also obliged to adapt to the new way of teaching history to their students. After a period of lengthy discussions on whether it would be more effective to teach more Malaya

history or to focus on teaching the history of the British Empire in general in order to strengthen the notion of imperial citizenship, the colonial authorities in Malaya and Singapore came up with a new history curriculum in 1928. The new curriculum, while maintaining the 'Great Man Theory' approach, started off by teaching Standard II students about the lives of important Asian figures such as Confucius, Buddha and the Prophet Mohammed, as well as Europeans who left a lasting impact on Asia such as Marco Polo, Ferdinand Magellan, Francis Drake and Stamford Raffles (Blackburn 22). Standard III students were taught about the lives of people who have been famous in world history such as Moses, Cyrus the Great, Pericles, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Jesus, Asoka, Charlemagne, William the Conqueror, Richard the Lionheart, Kublai Khan, Joan of Arc, Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Galileo Galilei, Peter the Great, Issac Newton, James Cook, Horatio Nelson, Napoleon Bonaparte, Charles Darwin, and Abraham Lincoln to name just a few, while Standards IV and V students focused on examining maps of ancient civilizations, the formation of modern Europe and the growth of the British Empire (Blackburn 169). Finally, Standards VI and VII students were taught the traditional but greatly condensed curriculum of the history of England, thus enforcing the 1928 curriculum's objective that "the history of England should be studied with reference to the great world movements and the connection of English with European and World History continually insisted upon" (Blackburn 22-3).

The British history curriculum continued to include more and more history of the Empire over the course of the 1930s. This process was led by Arthur Newton, who was the Rhodes Professor of Imperial History at King's College London from 1920 until 1938. Newton wrote several textbooks on the history of the Empire for use in schools in Britain and across the Empire including *The British Empire since 1938* and *A Junior History of the British Empire Oversea*, the latter of which emphasized

the co-prosperity of the Empire with particular attention to the role of the African colonies as a supplier of raw materials and a market for manufactured products (cf. Aldrich 177). To compensate for the content of most textbooks on the subject at the time which did not go beyond the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Newton's works covered the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century and went all the way through to the inter-war period (Blackburn 34).

This continuation of the trend to study the history of the Empire resulted in the revisions of the history curriculum for Malaya and Singapore in 1936 and again in 1939. The 1936 history curriculum required Standards IV and V students to learn, in addition to the topics laid out by the 1928 curriculum, an “outline of Malayan history [which would be] describing in particular the growth of Malayan contact with Western peoples” and also ensured that the British history course taken by Standards VI and VII students would emphasize “social and economic aspects and in overseas expansion, rather than on political events [with some attention being paid] to constitutional development” (Blackburn 169). The 1939 history curriculum was brought about due to the school certificate examination period being extended from one year (Standard VIII) to two years (Standard VIII and School Certificate Year), which resulted in the history of the British Empire from 1558 to 1938 being taught in these final two years of secondary school (Blackburn 35). Three textbooks were widely used in order to utilize the addition of Malay history in the new curricula for the fostering of loyalty to the Empire through the idea of imperial citizenship: William Morgan's *The Story of Malaya*, Neil Ryan's *Malaya Through Four Centuries: An Anthology, 1500-1800*, and Philip Nazareth's *The Malayan Story*. These works all “lay stress on different people of the region, the coming of the Portuguese, the Dutch and eventually the British [but] as if the process was inevitable and legitimate” (Watson 166). Such development in the study of the



history of the British Empire in Britain's sphere of influence in Southeast Asia would, however, soon undergo a radical transformation with the outbreak of World War II and all the political, social and moral reverberations that such cataclysmic milestones in human history entail.

### 3. Decolonization and History Education in the Immediate Postwar Period

Despite Britain's ultimate victory in World War II, the global conflict proved itself to be the "major catalyst in the breakup of the British Empire" (Rose 231). British prestige was "battered by the loss of Malaya [to the Japanese in 1942 which was] a significant problem because prestige was a vital buttress of imperial rule" (Jackson, 414). The British economy was burdened with wartime debts of 4.7 billion pounds (Gowland 16) which could not but raise "doubts about Britain's military capacity to restore its authority – particularly in its Far Eastern colonies where local nationalist guerrilla armies formed to fight the Japanese were inevitably reluctant to allow former colonial masters to resume where they had left off after victory had been achieved" (Self 40). Loss of face and economic woes notwithstanding, the dissolution of Empire was further spurred on by a fundamental shift in the direction of history education in some of the Empire's most important dominions that occurred during the global conflict. In the case of Australia, whose participation in the war instilled "an unhesitating, sometimes chauvinistic national pride" in the Australian people (Jupp 817), the conflict "accelerated interest in the study of modern or twentieth-century history, world history and geography, and international relations" and "revitalized the secondary school's interest in national history and politics"

(Spaull 160). This basically “spelt the final blow to the hegemony of British history” in the Australian history curriculum (Spaull 161) as this “resurgence of nationalism in Australian schools [paved the way for the] history of Australia as a story of national aspiration and nationhood (1880-1940) [to be] implanted in the history syllabus” (Spaull 162).

The situation in Malaya and Singapore could be said to have been similar to that in Australia, although the Japanese occupation of Malaya after the fall of Singapore in February 1942 meant that the southeast Asians, unlike their Australian allies, experienced Japanese rule and the political, social and educational upheaval that this change of colonial masters entailed. Immediately after the takeover, the Japanese administration implemented an educational policy as part of the ‘Principles of the *Gunsei* Disposition of the Occupied Area’ in March 1942. The objectives of the policy “were to unite the cultures of the indigenous peoples of the southern region with Japanese culture under the spirit of *Hakko Ichiu* (universal brotherhood), to teach industrial technologies and the Japanese language as the lingua franca of the [Greater East Asia] Co-Prosperity Sphere” (Akashi 48). To that end, the Japanese Ministry of Education sent hundreds of instructors out to Burma, Java, Malaya and Singapore to teach Japanese history, culture and language so that the colonized would be “‘Nipponized’ into being Japanese subjects” (cf. Blackburn 47). Education of this nature began early with primary schools using short textbooks such as *Yoi Kodomo* (Good Children). Written in Japanese with colourful illustrations, the book included pictures of Japanese soldiers “standing shoulder to shoulder atop the walls of a Chinese fortification with arms, rifles and Japanese flags raised in a jubilant banzai salute to the emperor” (Lincicome 105). The goal of the book and others like it obviously was to “stoke up patriotism and support for Japanese imperialism” (Blackburn 48), for which students – even those who were training to be technicians,

mechanics and electricians as required for the Japanese war effort (Wilson 20) – were obliged spend a considerable amount of time studying Japanese history and culture.

Such ‘Nipponization’ policies, of which history education was an essential aspect, had a profound effect on the people of Malaya and Singapore, as the British authorities realized on their return after the Japanese surrender in August 1945. Britain could not realistically hope for a full restoration of her pre-war authority in Southeast Asia since her defeat at the hands of Japan had in effect ensured that “the mystique of the superior white man had been shattered” (Barr 193). In any case, the American demand for Britain to adhere to the 1941 Atlantic Charter, a joint declaration issued by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill which “affirmed national self-government, if not exactly national self-determination, [be] restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them” (Summers 145), made it virtually impossible for the British to attempt to rule Malaya and Singapore in the same way as they had done before 1942. Therefore, Britain implemented plans for increased self-government, for which a new postwar education policy was “perceived as vital” (Blackburn 51) not least because it was seen as imperative that the effects of Japanese wartime education on the youth of Malaya and Singapore be effectively countered (Blackburn 53). The objective of the new education policy was “to aim at a system that will be in keeping with the ideal of Malaya as one country with one destiny” which would foster “a sense of common citizenship and of partnership with the British Commonwealth” (Blackburn 51). This direction of policy meant that the history curriculum would need to be ‘Malayan-centric’ in character as the authorities realized the “improbability of creating a sense of Malayan unity without [learning the] history of how the different ethnic groups share a common past in Malaya and Singapore” (Blackburn 57-58). To that end, the education authorities attempted to introduce a common history textbook, entitled *The History of Malaya for Children*,

for use in primary schools but ultimately failed due to opposition to the principle writers of the book being Australians and due to issues concerning financial feasibility (Blackburn 58-59). Nevertheless, despite these initial problems, any desire to revert the history curriculum of Malaya and Singapore to what it was before the war was non-existent by the early 1950s: moving away from a ‘British-centric’ history syllabus to a ‘Malayan-centric’ one was now a tide that could not be turned back in the postwar phenomenon of decolonization.

#### 4. Attempts to Reform Imperial and Commonwealth History Education in Britain

In comparison to the changes in the history curriculum of the wider Empire in line with the postwar trend of decolonization, the history curriculum of Britain herself remained unchanged in the immediate postwar period. A 1943 government White Paper on British postwar education policy, entitled *On Educational Reconstruction*, called for fresh approaches in the teaching of history, geography and modern languages in order “to arouse and quicken in the pupils a livelier interest in the meaning and responsibilities of citizenship of this country, the Empire and the world abroad” (McCulloch 107). But this statement was “just a vague aspiration, for no government between 1944 and 1964 had any intention of imposing its own syllabus on the schools – in history or in any other subject” (Cannadine 111). In most secondary schools in the 1950s, students aged 11 to 12 studied pre-history, ancient civilization or medieval history while students aged 12 to 13 learned about the Tudors and the Stuarts. Students aged 13 to 14 studied 18<sup>th</sup> century England with some American and Empire history, while students aged 14 to 16 learned 19<sup>th</sup>

century English and European history for the public School Certificate examination (Sylvester 11). Although, as mentioned above, the history of the British Empire had been gradually introduced into English schools since the end of World War I, English history continued to constitute the dominant – almost exclusive – content of the English history syllabus in the immediate postwar period.

The central focus on English history in the English history syllabus, alongside the comparatively minuscule portion of Empire history, naturally brought about a “disturbing” lack of knowledge and interest in the Commonwealth at a time when Britain was doing all it could to preserve and strengthen her relationship with her imperial – and former imperial – possessions (TNA, DO 35/8245, 21 Dec 1955). Many concerned observers bemoaned the fact that “little is done in schools to teach children about the Commonwealth [and where] the subject is taught, it is taught only from the point of view of United Kingdom history ... Teachers are themselves not taught about the Commonwealth, and, despite the efforts made to promote Commonwealth studies at Universities ... the Commonwealth does not figure as a major subject” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 21 Dec 1955). Such complaints made to the relevant members of government were so numerous that in January 1955 the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Alec Douglas-Home, decided to meet representatives from the Imperial Institute – an organization which ran “courses on individual Commonwealth countries for large numbers of school children” – to hear their views on the problems of educating English school children on the history of the Empire (TNA, DO 35/8245, 30 Jan 1956). The representatives argued that the existing textbooks on imperial history – as Commonwealth history was labelled by examination boards – contained “an appalling number of bad mistakes” but “publishers were reluctant to undertake either their revision or the commissioning of new books, unless a drive was made by the Ministry of Education to ensure that a

large number of schools took the subject for the General Certificate of Education [which was introduced in 1951 to replace the School Certificate],” but this could not happen because the Ministry was “reluctant to take responsibility for the courses taught in schools [since] the syllabi for the G.C.E. were, in fact, settled regionally [by the Local Education Authorities] and the examination papers set under the authority of the local universities” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 31 Jan 1956).

Having been advised on these issues, Home wrote to the Minister of Education, David Eccles, asking for the latter’s cooperation in dealing with the “deplorable” condition of Commonwealth history education in England (TNA, DO 35/8245, 7 Feb 1956). However, the Ministry of Education’s dilemma was that Commonwealth history simply was not sufficiently popular in comparison to other history subjects. Of the 240 schools that took the GCE examination set by the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board in 1956, only 30 candidates from 6 schools took Imperial History as a subject (TNA, DO 35/8245, 28 Jul 1956). The reason for this was that “American history had ‘caught on’ better than Commonwealth history in the last twenty years, while European history, if only as a background to our own, is very widely, and surely very properly taken” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 28 Feb 1956). More significantly, the Ministry did not regard studying the history of the Commonwealth countries in areas such as Central Africa as important and relevant as studying the “contemporary – especially the economic – way of life of the peoples concerned” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 28 Feb 1956). As such, the Ministry advised the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) against overrating the importance of Commonwealth history in the study of the Commonwealth (TNA, DO 35/8245, 28 Feb 1956). Home, however, refused to let the matter rest there and accepted Eccles’ suggestion that the officials from the two ministries meet to discuss various possible courses of action on improving Commonwealth history education (TNA, DO 35/8245, 1 Mar 1956).

Urged on by the two ministers, officials at the Ministry of Education brought forward the idea of organizing a conference course on Commonwealth history which would be run by the Imperial Institute, directed by a Professor of Imperial History at either Oxford or Cambridge University, and supported by an organizing secretary and some university lecturers and schoolteachers acting as tutorial staff (TNA, ED 121/861, 20 Apr 1956). Representatives from the Ministry and from the CRO then met on 30 April 1956 to discuss the idea further, where it was agreed that since “there was need for more to be done at the University level if we were going to improve the position in the schools,” a conference course organized by the Imperial Institute to be held “in the summer of 1957 ... with a membership of about 50 or 60” would indeed be appropriate (TNA, ED 121/861, 30 Apr 1956). It was further agreed that the CRO would contribute towards the cost of the course, and that a “larger advisory committee [composed of the Commonwealth countries’] High Commissioners in the U.K.” might be formed as well as having “Commonwealth representation on the course itself both in the student body and at the tutorial level” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 30 April 1956). In choosing the potential Chair of the conference, the CRO put forward the names of Vincent Harlow, Beit Professor of the History of the British Empire at Oxford, and Nicholas Mansergh, Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History at Cambridge (TNA, DO 35/8245, 1 May 1956).

But problems soon began to arise as the idea of a conference course on Commonwealth history for 1957 materialized and the CRO subsequently decided to ask further field for advice on how the conference should be held and how funding for promoting Commonwealth studies could be obtained. Charles Ponsonby, a former Conservative Member of Parliament and the Chairman of the Royal Empire Society – an organization founded as the Colonial Society in 1868 as a “nonpolitical advocacy group and a forum for members to learn about the imperial issues of the

day” where those interested could consult its library and listen to lectures (Doyle, 197) – told a CRO official that the Royal Empire Society was “aware of the unsatisfactory situation as regards the teaching of history” and was “about to consider whether an appeal could be launched for a fund of £100,000 to finance its own work in this respect” in which case the government’s conference course “might not then be necessary” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 5 Oct 1956). A few days after the exchange, the Imperial Studies Committee of the Royal Empire Society met on 4 October and decided that an informal meeting should take place between members of the Committee and members of the Historical Association – a society founded in 1906 composed of academics and schoolteachers to promote history teaching at all levels – to “explore the possibility of convening a Conference of History teachers ... for a thorough review of (a) the need for a fresh approach to Imperial History in the Schools, and (b) practical measures to be adopted in teaching and examining the subject” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 4 Oct 1956). This manoeuvre caused alarm bells to ring within the CRO since this meant that the Society would launch the appeal “without any prior investigation of the extent of the problem [or] any attempt to bring in the Ministry of Education,” and that the “support of the other societies and foundations, to say nothing of the university and school authorities and of the independent foundations, would certainly not be forthcoming to anything like the extent we hope, if the project is to be a Royal Empire Society one” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 15 Oct 1956). The CRO felt that a general conference of societies as envisaged by the Royal Empire Society was “not the right body to try to deal with details of university curricula, subjects of G.C.E. examination, training of teachers and school timetables,” and that therefore the CRO would “have to be careful not to let the Royal Empire Society in their enthusiasm take over [the] Teaching-of-Commonweath-History Conference” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 15 Oct 1956).



Consequently, the Ministry of Education decided to seize the initiative by proposing to bring Vincent Harlow, who in addition to his professorship at Oxford was also Chairman of the Imperial Studies Committee of the Royal Empire Society, "into the picture since the various moves to stimulate Commonwealth studies might start overlapping or getting entangled" by getting his agreement to "act as Director of the course when the time comes and in the interval to act as Chairman of the Organizing Committee" (TNA, ED 121/861, 22 Oct 1956). The CRO concurred with this suggestion, pointing out the necessity of getting Harlow to "disclose his hand" before fixing the timetable for the conference (TNA, DO 35/8245, 29 Oct 1956). A meeting, therefore took place on 21 November participated by Charles Ponsonby, Vincent Harlow and officials from the CRO and the Ministry of Education. At the meeting Ponsonby informed the officials that he had come round to the idea that the Royal Empire Society should not overtake the work of the government's conference, which led the officials to conclude that the "danger seemed to clear away" (TNA, ED 121/861, 22 Nov 1956). However, possibly in return for the Royal Empire Society's agreement not to step on the toes of the government, Harlow demanded that the Imperial Institute not be chosen to organize the government's conference and submitted a proposal calling for the establishment of a "British Commonwealth Trust, quite separate from 'though it would also work through, existing organizations (e.g. the Royal Empire Society)' which would have a governing body, a staff, including a Director with a wide range of Commonwealth affairs, and which would ... stimulate the study of the history of the Commonwealth and current Commonwealth affairs; to organize visits to the UK by leaders of informed opinion from the overseas Commonwealth; to organize similar visits from the UK; to promote the production of authoritative books on the Commonwealth, designed for the ordinary readers, and afford financial and other assistance for approved projects" (TNA, ED 121/861, 13

Dec 1956).

The Ministry of Education's position on Harlow's proposal was that it was "somewhat a case of everybody trying to co-ordinate everybody else and then to invent a co-ordinating body to end all co-ordinating bodies" but that it would not oppose such a creation provided it did not do anything until the government's "suggested study conference has been got onto its feet and has taken place and produced its recommendations" (TNA, ED 121/861, 19 Dec 1956). It was on this premise that the officials had another meeting with Harlow in January 1957 where it was agreed that the Imperial Institute would be replaced as the organizers by the Royal Institute of International Affairs (TNA, ED 121/861, 10 Jan 1957), an internationally renowned non-governmental organization better known as Chatham House which analyzed major global issues and had been organizing "a series of five-yearly Unofficial Commonwealth Relations Conference involving leading politicians, civil servants, academics, editors and military men" (Van Bilzen, 221). However, this change of plan brought about strong protests from the Imperial Institute, which warned that it "would be very disappointed indeed if our part in [the Conference] were given to anybody else [since there is] no doubt as to our ability to cope, provided adequate time is given to us and some clerical assistance. It would mean a great deal to us in academic circles" (TNA, ED 121/861, 1 Feb 1957). Some in the Ministry of Education expressed sympathy for the Imperial Institute's plight, and questioned whether it was necessary to bend over backwards in this manner in order just to please Vincent Harlow (TNA, ED 121/861, 5 Feb 1957).

This heavy reliance by the government on prominent academics to produce new ideas on the education of Commonwealth history, coupled with its reluctance to let other more experienced institutions take the lead on the issue, effect blew up in the government's face when Vincent Harlow, with no progress being made on the

establishment of his 'British Commonwealth Trust,' ultimately decided not to "give any practical support, and particularly showed no inclination to act as director of studies" for the government's conference course (TNA, ED 121/861, 28 Mar 1957). This led to an exchange of views between the CRO and the Ministry of Education as to whether the responsibility for organizing the conference should revert back to the Imperial Institute as Harlow had "dropped out of the picture and he was rather against the Insitute" (TNA, ED 121/861, 28 Mar 1957). The Ministry of Education then took that opportunity to "re-think" matters concerning the participants of the conference, arguing that if university academics were in attendance as full participants "there may be a danger of university requirements becoming the major topic of discussion with possible complications ... it would be wiser to restrict university participation to the staff of the study conference and to visitors from the university where it is held coming in to take part in individual discussions" (TNA, ED 121/861, 28 Mar 1957). With no suitable person to act as director of studies and with the Ministry of Education suddenly raising fundamental questions about who should be attending, by the summer of 1957 – the time period first envisaged for hosting the event - the proposals for the government's conference course had "moved in a series of rather erratic explosions, rather after the manner of early cars and that [discussions for launching the conference course had] been at a standstill for some time" (TNA, ED 121/861, 14 Aug 1957).

## 5. Conclusion

In early 1958, the CRO launched an attempt to revive the idea of the conference course with the cooperation of Chatham House, but little came of it since Chatham House made it clear that because they studied problems “factually and do not engage in propaganda, they must not be too closely committed to any exercise which can be considered to have as its objective the projection of the Commonwealth as distinct from the study of the Commonwealth” (TNA, DO 35/8245, 28 Jan 1958). With this, any serious attempt to strengthen Commonwealth history education within the national curriculum came to an end, culminating 55 years later in the then Conservative government’s proposals of 2013 to implement one of the most Anglo-centric history curricula in recent memory (Won 400-401).

The postwar British government, in its endeavor to strengthen the cohesion of the Commonwealth for Britain’s continued influence on the world stage, did comprehend the importance of educating Commonwealth history to British students in order to achieve this objective. However, the government’s inability to self-establish acceptable criteria due to the lack of internal specialists and its subsequent over-reliance on outside counsel led to a number of relevant organizations vying for profile enhancement competing for the government’s ear, which in turn led to the government’s inability to take a firm course of action and the inevitable decline in enthusiasm thereafter. By failing to maintain a tight grip on the issue of history education at a critical moment in its history, Britain lost an important opportunity to establish a postwar tradition of learning more about her Commonwealth partners and thereby fostering a closer relationship with them, a loss that is felt all the more keenly now that Britain had decided to leave the EU and therefore needs more allies across the globe than ever before. Studying the history of one’s friends – and

enemies – across the world is vital for Britain's future relations with the rest of the world as she enters a new chapter in her diplomatic endeavors. Britain will do well to remember the squandered opportunities of the immediate postwar past, and to ensure that tomorrow's leaders will be better equipped to deal with the global challenges that lay ahead.

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## 국문초록

탈식민화와 영국의 제국 및  
영연방 역사교육 개혁 시도, 1955-58

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제1차 세계 대전 전까지만 해도 영국과 영제국의 역사교육은 영국사 학습 중심으로 운영되었고, 전쟁이 끝나면서 국제협력 강화의 필요성에 의거하여 영제국 소속 식민지들의 역사가 교과과정에 도입되기 시작하면서 이 추세는 1930년대 내내 이어졌다. 하지만 제2차 세계 대전으로 인해 영국의 권위가 무너지면서 영제국 내에서의 영국사 교육은 몰락하기 시작하였지만 영국에서의 영국사 중심 역사교육은 계속되었다. 영국의 입장에서 전후 세계 질서에서 강대국급의 영향력을 행사하기 위해 영연방과의 돈독한 관계를 유지하는 것은 중요하였다. 그러나 영국 국민이 영연방 국가들의 역사에 대한 지식이나 관심이 크게 저조함을 우려한 영국 영연방관계부는 1956년 초에 교육부에게 영국 학교 내에서의 영연방 역사교육을 강화할 방법을 같이 모색할 것을 제안하였다. 이에 두 부처는 영연방 역사 전공 교수들과 일선 역사교사들이 참석하여 영연방 역사교육 문제를 논의하는 학회를 1957년 여름에 개최하는 계획을 수립하였다. 내부 전문가가 없었던 정부로서는 영연방 역사 전문가들의 자문이 절대적으로 필요하였으나, 이러한 전문가들이 포진해있던 민간단체인 왕립제국협회가 정부와는 별개로 영국 내 영연방 역사교육의 발전 방안을 논의할 학회를 준비하고 있다는 사실이 알려졌다. 이에 정부가 역사교육 과정 개편과 관련한 주도권을 빼앗기지 않기 위해 왕립제국협회가 정부 주관 학회에 협조할 것을 요구하자, 왕립제국협회는 그 조건으로 경쟁 단체인 제국연구소에게 학회의 주회를 맡기지 않고 영국과 영연방 간의 교류를 총괄할 ‘영국영연방협회’의 설립을 요구하였다. 결국 정부가 제국연구소로부터 강력한 항의를 받는 것을 감수하면서까지 연구소를 배제하였으나, 영국영연방협회의 설립이 미진하

면서 결국 왕립제국협회마저 정부 주최 학회에 협조하지 않을 것임을 천명하면서 학회를 주최할만한 전문가를 확보하는 데에 실패하였다. 이에 정부가 추진 동력을 상실하면서 학회 개최는 흐지부지되었고 영국 내 영연방 역사교육 강화 시도는 결국 실패로 돌아갔다.

**주제어:** 영제국, 영연방, 역사교육, 제국연구소, 왕립제국협회

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