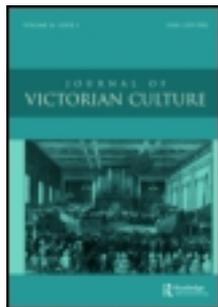


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The Centrality of Locality: The Local State, Local Democracy, and Local Consciousness in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain

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PERSPECTIVE

The Centrality of Locality: The Local State, Local Democracy, and Local Consciousness in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain

Philip Harling

Historians of Victorian and Edwardian Britain are increasingly obsessed with the 'national', the 'imperial', and the 'global'. So it may well seem odd to devote a review essay to the centrality of the local in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and downright perverse to focus on a subject so hopelessly remote from the cutting edge as local government. Yet the locality and its governance still attract a good deal of scholarly attention, for the compelling reason that these things mattered deeply to people at the time. Of course they still matter to people, and the contemporary concern with the erosion of local autonomy under the 'classic' welfare state of 1948-1979 and the Thatcherite assault on it has been a major influence on the scholarship that I shall be highlighting here.

Over the last quarter-century it has remained fashionable across the political spectrum to assail the welfare state for its putative centralizing excesses. Disowning the welfare state has become not only a political but a scholarly preoccupation, and the old teleological notion of the Victorian state as a precursor to the welfare state has consequently been stood on its head. Forty-odd years ago virtually all historians who paid any attention to the subject could readily agree that centralization was the key to overcoming the unprecedented social problems thrown up in the wake of what everybody still called the 'Industrial Revolution'. When David Roberts hailed the 'Victorian origins' of the British welfare state, what he chiefly had in mind were social reforms (factory, sanitary, and the like) that were gradually but inexorably given teeth by parliamentary statutes and central inspectorates.¹ The same was true of Oliver MacDonagh and the other advocates of a 'stages approach' to

reform, who could discern in the chaotic patchwork of Victorian administration a 'pattern of government growth' that was becoming more effective because it was becoming more centralized.² 'Pessimists' such as Jenifer Hart who assailed the likes of MacDonagh for a Panglossian attachment to inevitable Improvement were even more ardent centralizers. According to them, social reform was far from inevitable, but had to be forced upon the national political agenda and then upon local obstructionists by a heroic cadre of earnest evangelicals and Benthamite administrators.³ All the scholarly combatants either implicitly or explicitly agreed with the classic account of the Webbs that local government – in the grip of penny-pinching rateocrats, in thrall to sinister special interests, a hopeless hotch-potch of competing and overlapping jurisdictions – was an obstacle which had to be overcome by a centralizing state before the urban-industrial excesses of the 'long' nineteenth century could be curbed.⁴

In stark contrast, historians now hail the primacy of the local in the provision of social services in a 'mixed economy of welfare' in which central government figured only marginally before the landmark national-insurance schemes of Asquith's Liberal government. Far from being the inefficient and corrupt mess that the Webbs made it out to be, historians now stress that the parish vestries, improvement commissions, and charitable organizations of the second half of the eighteenth century did a relatively effective job of targeting poor relief and bringing amenities to the rapidly growing towns.⁵ Their nineteenth-century counterparts, faced with an unprecedented demographic challenge which threatened infrastructural collapse, are now given at least passing and sometimes even decent marks for carrying on in an unenviable situation.⁶ Admittedly, what most clearly emerges from much of the recent literature is just how little welfare provision owed anything at all to any branch of government, either central or local. Fewer than three per cent of the population of England and Wales were in receipt of any form of Poor Law relief at any point in the 1890s; even the majority of the elderly poor remained independent of state financial support until the introduction of a modest old-age pensions programme in 1908. As late as 1911 the gross annual receipts of registered charities outstripped Poor Law expenditure, a figure which excludes the vast amounts of mutual aid that flowed through the trade unions.⁷ When government did intervene to provide welfare or urban amenities, it was overwhelmingly the local authorities that did the intervening, which is why local-government expenditure was growing twice as fast as central expenditure between 1850 and 1890.⁸ So if it is in any sense accurate to talk about a late-Victorian 'revolution in

government', this was emphatically a revolution carried out through local means, and chiefly for local reasons.

This new attention to the primacy of the local suggests four points that seem to me worth stressing. The first is that the 'localist' solution to arguably the biggest challenge thrown up by intensive industrialization and urbanization, i.e. the challenge to public health, was a relatively effective one, and indeed probably more effective than a 'centralizing' one would have been under the circumstances. The second is that the rehabilitation of localism suggests a new interpretation of Britain's democratization that stresses the gradual inclusion of poor men and women at the local level and not simply their formal exclusion at the national level. The third is that while we still tend to view 'collectivism' and 'national efficiency' as centralizing movements in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain, it was the locality and not the central state that became the chief site where the moral intrusiveness that we rightly associate with 'collectivism' and 'national efficiency' exerted itself and was contested. Moving beyond local politics and local government to local consciousness, the fourth and most general point is that our current obsession with imperial identity needs to be tempered by an appreciation for the enduring power of the local, which probably did more to block than to facilitate awareness of the empire among Britain's working-class families.

I

What did the delegation of virtually all responsibilities of civil governance to the local level portend for the management of the unprecedented urban growth of the industrializing era? This remains a central question to pose of the most rapidly urbanizing and most thoroughly urban society of the nineteenth century. Historians such as Simon Szreter have been pondering this question, most noticeably in the recent *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, and their answers provide some of the most compelling evidence to date for viewing Victorian local government as a help rather than a hindrance to public health.⁹ Admittedly, that help came rather late in the day. The new consensus is that the second quarter of the nineteenth century was indeed a period of urban crisis, which was only gradually overcome through the growth of large-scale investment in the urban infrastructure, the vast majority of it financed by the local authorities. Public investment failed to keep pace with urban population growth until at least the mid-century, and the result was the rise of the 'four Ds': disruption, deprivation, disease, and death.¹⁰ Britain's mushrooming industrial cities were fertile breed-

ing grounds for typhoid, typhus, tuberculosis, whooping cough, small pox, scarlet fever, and cholera. Life expectancy in the festering slums of Liverpool and Manchester fell to levels not seen since the Black Death.¹¹

The city fathers of the Georgian urban renaissance had been able to handle buoyant population growth without turning their towns into sloughs of despond. Why were things so much worse in the early-Victorian age? Here recent literature continues the venerable tradition of blaming the municipal franchise reform of 1835 for creating a stingy rateocracy of small landlords, shopkeepers, and manufacturers who resented the fact that their property bore a disproportionate share of local taxes and whose chief goal was to keep those taxes down. This coalition of the frugal generally kept control of the urban political agenda until a series of municipal electoral reforms in the third quarter of the century greatly increased the local electorate by enfranchising compound ratepayers, mostly working-class men who lived in rental properties and could see the personal benefit of more lavish spending on urban amenities. This new cadre of voters forged alliances with the urban patriciate – most notably in Joseph Chamberlain’s Birmingham but in a number of other cities, as well – and the end result was higher rates and much greater investment in the urban infrastructure.¹²

Scholars are now more forgiving of the stinginess of the local ‘ratepayer’s democracies’ than they used to be, and stress that they had to be finessed rather than coerced out of their resistance to large-scale sanitary reform. The alternative to a local option in public-health provision was the assumption of broader powers by the central government, something that only Sir Edwin Chadwick and his acolytes would have welcomed. As Martin Daunton convincingly argues, ‘cheap government’ was a consensual value in the mid-Victorian era. Britons continued to equate the central state with ‘Old Corruption’, an out-sized dispenser of special favours and illegitimate influence that had only recently been cut down to size. For this reason, ‘constraining the state, creating a sense of credibility in its actions, was a necessary prerequisite for positive action in the future’.¹³

A sceptical public required a go-slow approach to public health. But John Prest and others are quick to emphasize that this approach yielded sizable dividends. From the 1850s onwards more and more localities took advantage of permissive legislation to tighten health standards, and this greater flexibility ultimately bore fruit in the powerful compulsory measures of the 1870s that obliged all local governments to hire medical officers of health (MOHs) and vested those officers with extensive powers to regulate the quality of food and water. Local public-health professionals became the shock troops in a battle against disease

which led to the virtual eradication of smallpox, typhoid, and cholera by the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Peter Baldwin has convincingly argued that this peculiarly British way in public health – i.e. broad discretion, limited and gradual compulsion, and the comparatively very high level of infrastructural investment made possible by Britain's unprecedented *per capita* wealth – was the envy of Europe.¹⁵ Of course, the downside of local discretion was uneven investment. Not every town could be a municipal paradise on a par with Birmingham even if it wanted to be, because very few towns enjoyed a rateable base and/or municipal property holdings on a scale with Birmingham.¹⁶ Nevertheless, among the most significant statistics of the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a seventy-five per cent per capita increase in local-government spending, as virtually every major municipality used the income generated from higher rates and the municipalization of water, gas, electricity, and public transport not only to provide more adequate refuse disposal and street lighting but to create parks, museums, libraries, and municipal baths.¹⁷

II

A second point worth stressing is that the 'municipal gospel' was taking root in an increasingly open and participatory local political culture. Historians have recently made much of the exclusiveness of the parliamentary electorate from 1832 until at least 1918. Hence the 1832 Reform Act for England and Wales now seems to be chiefly noticed for its deliberate exclusion of women, the 1867 Reform Act for its deliberate exclusion of poor men (by dint of its rating and residency qualifications), and all parliamentary reforms up to 1918 for making 'masculinity ... the fundamental basis for citizenship in Britain', disabling not only women, but a good many men, as well, as 'the manhood of citizenship always had to be earned, rather than claimed as an inherent human right based on reason', and earned in ways that shifted from one reform act to another.¹⁸ This exclusionary argument seems to me to be reductive even in its own terms. By putting so much stress on the denial of formal voting rights it fails to consider the significant ways in which women exercised political authority through kinship and family ties, electioneering, and petitioning before and throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁹ More significantly for my purposes here, it fails to take into account the dramatic broadening of the local electorate, c.1850 to 1900, which created new participatory opportunities for a good many women and working-class men on the local level.

José Harris has vividly characterized public life in this era as an arena

of struggle between 'a limited, masculine, property-based polity ... and a comprehensive, pluralist polity based on citizens as individuals, open to all comers'.²⁰ The expansion of the local electorate marked a decisive contribution on behalf of the latter, and at a time when the local state was playing a larger role in the daily lives of most Britons, and an infinitely larger role than the central state did. It is worth briefly recapping some of the relevant democratizing measures. All ratepayers who met a one-year residency qualification were given the local franchise in 1869, including thousands of rate-paying single women and widows, resulting in municipal electorates of some 18 to 20% of the *total* borough population.²¹ The 1870 Education Act entitled women ratepayers to vote for and serve on school boards, and from 1875 they were entitled to serve as Poor Law guardians, as well. The 1875 Public Health Act established district councils in many areas, to be elected on a ratepayer franchise. The 1888 Local Government Act dispersed many of the powers of justices of the peace to new ratepayer-elected county and county borough councils. An act of 1894 created new parish, urban, and rural district councils on a similarly broad franchise. In 1899 all London vestries aside from the City Corporation were replaced by metropolitan borough councils, creating a massive number of new lower-middle-class and working-class voters. By 1900 there were over a million women on the county and borough council and Poor Law electoral registers, 'a female Trojan Horse within a still overwhelmingly masculine national constitution'.²² In contrast to the recent past, when urban and rural government was still concentrated in the hands of propertied oligarchies, by the mid-1890s local householders were eligible for most local offices, and a growing number of women and working-class men stood for election, particularly for the school boards and boards of guardians. The last formal obstacle to women's participation in local politics fell in 1907, when they were finally permitted to stand for seats on the county and municipal councils.²³ Thus, while it is true that all women and some 40 per cent of adult men were barred from the parliamentary franchise before 1918, a growing proportion of the 'excluded' were participating in local democracies that were playing a more active role than ever before in citizens' lives.

What difference did the broadening of the local electorate make? Anything like a definitive answer to this question awaits further research. But the provisional assessments to date suggest a mixed verdict. On the one hand, local democratization did not necessarily lead to greater collectivism. A good many towns in the West Riding of Yorkshire remained bastions of official Liberalism well into the 1890s and even beyond, for instance, and their leaders held firm against free

or subsidized school meals, anti-unemployment measures, and the like.²⁴ Local notables also retained control of the local agenda in the Black Country, successfully resisting demands for better pay for corporation workers, for instance.²⁵ On the other hand, virtually all the innovations in social policy that we tend to associate with the 1880s and 1890s started life as rate-aided local initiatives: early experiments in council housing, modest public-works schemes, and more capacious treatment of the 'deserving' poor (most notably children and the elderly) by innovative boards of guardians, as well as free school lunches, better infant care, and fair contracts for municipal employees.²⁶ Arguably the most ambitious experiment in local collectivism took place in the largest city in the western world, where a progressive Lib-Lab coalition controlled the London County Council for the better part of twenty years and led the way in the municipalization of tramways, the provision of public housing, the development of unemployment relief and anti-sweating schemes, and the negotiation of higher wages for public employees. It was largely thanks to the efforts of the LCC, Canon Barnett affirmed in the mid-1890s, that 'the social unrest of the last ten years, which took form in bitter cries, royal commissions, and social schemes, seems now to be settling down to a steady demand for better local administration'.²⁷ In London and elsewhere, the catalysts for these experiments were Lib-Lab alliances committed to the notion that the most effective means of making social reform central to politics was to move it to the top of the local agenda. While the issue requires much additional study, it does seem fair to say in the wake of Pat Thane's recent essays on the subject that collectivism and democratization at the local level relied pretty closely on each other, even if they did not always march in lockstep. While the House of Commons was still beyond the reach of workingmen and literally all women, both groups could and increasingly did play a significant role in setting the ever more expansive agendas of school boards, town councils and boards of guardians.²⁸

Local government was where virtually all the action was in terms of social policy, and women's contribution to local government was increasingly significant. As Thane points out, on the eve of the Great War women could vote for and serve on county, borough, urban, and rural-district and parish councils and Boards of Guardians (although the women who qualified varied from one institution to another). They could also be, and often were, appointed to local library, distress, midwifery, national-insurance, old-age pensions, school-care, and labour-exchange committees. By 1914-15 there were over 1,500 women serving as Poor Law guardians, nearly 700 as school-board members, 200 as rural-district councillors, and forty-eight as municipal or county coun-

cillors. As modest as these numbers might seem, they clearly indicate that the institutional presence of women in Britain at this time was a good deal more conspicuous than it was in any other major European nation or in the United States.²⁹

Patricia Hollis has convincingly argued that the 'ladies elect' of the localities unapologetically and inevitably spoke the language of separate spheres, because this was a language that 'valued women's domestic background and showed how it could strengthen civic life' through the provision of more adequate and dignified care for elderly paupers, more nurses for the Poor Law hospital wards, better food and clothing for children in the workhouses and the board schools, and school curricula that went beyond drilling in the 3 Rs to include music and nature study.³⁰ Such initiatives sought 'to push the boundaries of local action further out and to recast local government in a humanitarian mould'.³¹ They provided suffragists with strong evidence of women's ability and civic readiness for the national vote. But they also provided anti-suffragists such as Mrs Humphry Ward with the argument that women had no need for the national vote because their local-government work was a reasonable extension of women's traditional responsibilities in the private realm. That women were permitted to cast their first votes at a parliamentary election a full sixty years after they were permitted to cast their first votes in school board elections suggests the breadth and persistence of Ward's way of thinking.³² Still, to stress women's continued exclusion from national citizenship without taking their local activities into account is to seriously underestimate the extent of their political participation in the late-Victorian and Edwardian decades.

III

Herbert Spencer and a good many of his contemporaries equated the broadening of the late-Victorian social agenda with a 'collectivism' that magnified the powers of the central state at the expense not only of individual choice but of local discretion, and most historians tended to do the same until the last quarter-century or so. But recent literature suggests that 'collectivism' was chiefly a local issue until the fiscal burden it imposed on the narrow and essentially un-reformable structure of local taxation provoked a fiscal crisis that could only be resolved on a national basis. While municipal trading certainly helped to subsidize the broadening range of local-government activities, it was the ratepayers who shouldered much of the cost. Ultimately that burden simply became too heavy to bear. While the population of

England and Wales grew by 37% and the rateable value of property by 61% between 1875 and 1900, the rate revenue that flowed in to local authorities grew by 141%. Municipal indebtedness doubled over this period nevertheless, at a time when the national debt was actually shrinking.³³ The rates were a grossly inequitable levy, a tax on fixed real property that ignored personal income and ‘movable’ wealth, and as such they pressed especially hard on small landlords, tenants of modest means, and shopkeepers. As the rate burden grew, the incidence of local taxation became the major battle ground of local politics: radicals and some Liberals advocating the taxation of site values and the redistribution of rate income between rich and poor districts as the only way out of the bind, and Conservatives insisting on greater fiscal discipline whilst steadfastly defending the interests of ground landlords and urban speculators. There was no hope for a viable compromise solution to such a complicated subject, and one that pitted powerful vested interests against each other.³⁴ With no relief in sight, ratepayers rebelled against ‘municipal socialism’, nowhere more spectacularly than in London, where the Conservatives took control of the LCC in 1907 and held on to it for over a quarter of a century.³⁵

It is not coincidental that the Liberal majority which took such long strides toward ‘nationalizing’ social policy in the Edwardian era took power just as progressive alliances were being booted out at the local level.³⁶ More research needs to be done on this question, but the Liberals’ success in broadening the national social agenda suggests that the rebellion against ‘municipal socialism’ was not a verdict against more extensive social provision as such, but against the limited means of paying for it locally. The national government could and did help to pay for it through grants-in-aid and low-interest loans.³⁷ Ultimately, however, it was the adoption of the most progressive tax structure of any major European state that ‘nationalized’ social policy. While French and German statesmen tried, but signally failed, to introduce progressive tax principles in the race for more guns and butter, the Liberals managed to rebuild an already comparatively efficient direct-tax system on the pillars of differentiation (between earned and unearned income) and graduation. One of the chief aims of the landmark budgets of 1907-9 and 1914 was to earmark at least half of the revenue generated from the reforms enshrined within them to local infrastructural and social services.³⁸ But while the Liberals’ professed aim was to bolster and complement local initiative and autonomy in welfare provision, a good many of their measures tended to supplant it – by attaching more strings to grants-in-aid, by financing the new contributory insurance schemes through the Exchequer, and so on. By

pointing to such centralizing tendencies one can still build a strong case for the *Edwardian* origins of the British welfare state. Nevertheless, this was still very much a 'mixed economy of welfare' in which personal thrift, private charity, and local government played a far more conspicuous role than the central state.³⁹

We likewise see the persistence of the local in much of the recent literature that focuses on the efforts of the late-Victorian and Edwardian state to promote 'national efficiency' in a more insecure and competitive world by disciplining the 'residuum' – prostitutes, able-bodied paupers, drunkards, recidivists, and the like. Disciplinary rigour (e.g. the tightening-up of outdoor relief) was no less a hallmark of Gladstonian Liberalism than emancipatory legislation (e.g. Irish Church disestablishment). Indeed, the two complemented each other, as social liberation was seen to depend on the more vigorous policing of vices that (allegedly) had vicious public consequences.⁴⁰ As the notion of social interconnectedness and organicism took root along a broad intellectual front at the end of the nineteenth century,⁴¹ the policing of social 'vice' came to seem even more necessary. It was now not only imperative to combat environmental influences that limited human freedom, but to discipline those moral failures that ostensibly threatened the broader community.⁴² This disciplinary ethos ran strong not only among avid centralizers like the Fabians, but also among 'progressive' philanthropists such as Canon Barnett and Labour activists in local government. The impulse to distinguish 'deserving' from 'undeserving' poverty arguably ran deepest within working-class communities themselves, and early Labour Party stalwarts such as George Lansbury and Will Crooks placed a strong emphasis not only on self-help, but on the need to punish those who refused to help themselves.⁴³ It was critically important for them, however, that working-class people be judges in their own cases, which is why they advocated working-class control of boards of guardians, for instance.

Control of the agencies of the local state was still well beyond the grasp of humbler folk in most districts, however, as residency qualifications and the lack of time and money to serve in office still placed significant limits on the number of working-class voters and office-holders. Recent scholarship suggests that they had ample reason to view themselves not as the beneficiaries but as the victims of a local state and volunteer auxiliary forces largely controlled by more privileged local groups and bent on disciplining them to a higher standard of national efficiency in an age of intensifying imperial competition. Take, for instance, the child welfare movement most vividly chronicled by Anna Davin and Ellen Ross, which through a range of permissive as well

as compulsory legislation grew to become a formidable and deeply resented presence in the lives of urban working-class mothers. Combating the physical 'degeneration' of the urban 'residuum' became something of a national obsession in the wake of the Boer War, but the struggle to improve the health of working-class youth was a local one. That struggle turned into a sort of class warfare, as working-class mothers were now regularly harassed by health visitors, school doctors, and representatives of the local school care committees who insisted that mothers had a civic duty to keep their children clean, healthy, and properly fed even though the substandard living conditions they were forced to endure made this next to impossible. While the local authorities made vigorous and significantly intrusive efforts to promote breast-feeding and delousing, for instance, they did precious little to address mothers' biggest preoccupations, such as birth control and chronic non-fatal illness.⁴⁴

Municipal nanny-statism extended from the washing of slum children at cleansing stations to the restrictive licensing of pubs and music halls, and it had significant political implications. Indeed, Susan Pennybacker argues that the demise of the LCC progressive coalition was at least as much a revolt against their 'appetite for managing other people's lives'⁴⁵ as it was a rate revolt. The over-vigilant supervision of domestic hygiene, school attendance, and popular entertainments prompted too many Londoners to equate the LCC with 'the niggling state, the bureaucrat always there when you did not need him, never when you do'.⁴⁶ At the end of the day, Pennybacker concludes, the progressive LCC was an intrusive enough presence in people's lives to make them feel they were being messed about, but not a big enough one to make much of a positive difference in their material circumstances: 'intrusion and supervision were substituted for grander programmes of social amelioration or cultural enlightenment'.⁴⁷

One can accept the validity of this line of reasoning and still conclude that it is exaggerated. The Edwardian municipality was indeed an engine of moral discipline, but it was manifestly an engine of material progress, as well, and indeed often an engine of cross-class solidarity and initiative that led to notable improvements in the urban environment. If it had an obsession with social discipline, that obsession was also manifest in the vibrant associational culture of a society that was renowned (both at home and abroad) for its orderliness.⁴⁸ That orderliness probably had at least as much to do with the exacting standards of working-class propriety and decorum as it did with middle-class efforts at social control. Despite these caveats, recent literature gives us ample reason to conclude that one of the chief objectives of

Edwardian local government and the voluntary agencies on which it so heavily relied was to discipline the 'residuum' up to a higher standard of 'efficiency', both for their own good and for that of the nation.

IV

Finally, let us move from the realm of local politics and government to the more abstract realm of identity. At a time when British historians are increasingly preoccupied with the breadth of imperial consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century, it is worth remembering the Edwardian preoccupation with the local. The empire was of course a Great Fact, encompassing twelve million square miles of land and a quarter of the earth's inhabitants in 1900. Indeed, it was a fact so great that even its staunchest critics at home could not imagine a world without it.⁴⁹ Tellingly, there was no Edwardian revival of Cobdenite little Englandism even though the requirements of imperial defence meant that British taxpayers shouldered two or three times the weight in military costs that their counterparts did in the other major European countries.⁵⁰ Recent scholarship has made clear the centrality of the empire at home in a great many ways. It occupied centre-stage in the great debates surrounding social welfare, military preparedness, and the responsibilities of parents to children. It seemed to offer a way out (via imperial federation) to those who feared the consequences of 'degeneration' and the menacing posture of rival nation-states. The need to defend it did much to bring about the encadrement of British boys through drilling and gymnastics in the board schools, the games ethic in the public schools, rifle clubs, and the youth cadet corps, most notably Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts. It inspired large adult voluntary associations in addition to the Scouts, most notably the Navy League and Lord Roberts's National Service League (which boasted, respectively, about 100,000 and over 200,000 members by 1914). It inspired a cult of heroes, most notably General Gordon and Roberts himself. It was the focus of much of the popular literature of the day, from Kipling to Henty to Haggard. In short, there can be no doubting the pervasiveness of empire at home.⁵¹

It was a pervasive interest, but was it a consuming one? In significant ways it was not. The political mobilization inspired by empire, for instance, was comparatively modest. Germany's Navy League had at least ten times the membership of its British counterpart.⁵² The Unionists' tariff-reform campaign was by far the most ambitious effort to encourage British voters to attach their destinies to the empire. It failed decisively, in spite or perhaps because of the public-relations blitz

of the Tariff Reform League, which inundated the nation with 53 million leaflets, pamphlets, and posters over the three general election campaigns of 1906-10. The majority of voters refused to accept even a short-term rise in the price of food as a down payment on the greater Anglo-Saxon co-prosperity sphere that Joseph Chamberlain and company promised them.⁵³ It was telling that the Unionists' appeal to imperial patriotism in these years failed to excite many voters outside their base in southern England, that bastion of the imperial-service middle class. People living elsewhere had a harder time imagining themselves as members of an imperial governing race, and the poorer one was, the less imaginable it seemed.⁵⁴

John Mackenzie concedes the political failure of 'social imperialism', but still concludes that an imperial identity took root at home, for 'the public, largely uninterested in specific imperial principles and policies, were none the less fascinated by Empire's existence, its racial connotations, and the superior self-image which it offered in respect of the rest of the world'.⁵⁵ Perhaps, but perhaps not, particularly if one includes among the 'public' the urban manual workers and their families who accounted for by far the largest segment of the British population at the turn of the nineteenth century. There is ample evidence to conclude that the focus of their lives remained resolutely local, and the empire a Great Fact that left remarkably little impression on them. Admittedly, a good many historians would disagree with this conclusion. In a very good book, for instance, Stephen Heathorn has recently sought to display the board schools as the drilling grounds for an imperial working class. They sought to instill in their charges a broader sense of national and imperial mission through their emphasis on physical culture and a curriculum which equated 'good citizenship' with the performance of duties rather than the exercise of individual rights, and which embraced a 'Liberal master narrative' that relentlessly stressed the Anglo-Saxon genius for manly comportment, fair play, and good government. Heathorn convincingly argues that the imperial schooling of the rising working-class generation was not a crude exercise in social control, but 'a broader naturalization of imperial identity as part of the "innate" inheritance of the English National Community'.⁵⁶

An imperial identity may well have been 'naturalized' by the board schools, but was it ever internalized by their charges? The evidence recently presented by Jonathan Rose in another excellent book suggests that it was not.⁵⁷ Unlike Heathorn, Rose is chiefly interested in the reception rather than the transmission of ideas, and his mining of a vast range of autobiographical recollections suggests that for all the time

they spent steeping in a heady imperial brew – at the board schools, through the immensely popular Greyfriars public school stories in the *Gem* and the *Magnet* and the no less popular novels of G.A. Henty, and so on – working-class youth nevertheless remained ‘strikingly unaware of their empire’.⁵⁸ Their recorded memories in later life suggest a vague sense of feeling somehow special *because* they lived at the heart of a great empire, but with precious little awareness of, much less affinity with, colonies that were impossibly remote from their own daily experience. That experience was intensely local, as Edwardian working-class life was bounded by the neighbourhood. The empire was largely irrelevant to the neighbourhood unless some of the local boys had gone off to fight for it, and even then the overwhelming concern was simply their safe return home. Empire Day, introduced in 1904 at least partly as a means of rousing working-class children out of their apathy, largely failed to do so. In later life they remembered it simply as a half-holiday, and some recalled being struck by the irony of thus being asked to take time to contemplate their membership in an imperial race whilst they were chronically underfed and poorly clothed.⁵⁹

All this is not to deny the significance and indeed the centrality of the national and the imperial to the politics and society of the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras. But it is to suggest that this needs to be more carefully balanced against the persistence of the local. As we have seen, the effort to take that persistence more fully into account has dramatically altered our understanding of social-welfare arrangements and the development of the urban infrastructure between 1870 and 1914. It is, moreover, providing us with a better understanding of the diffuse but formidable disciplinary powers of the ostensibly ‘minimal’ British state. Now, as historians of modern Britain reach out to the empire and the entire terraqueous globe, it would be a mistake to leave the town hall and the neighbourhood entirely behind.

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Endnotes

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