GENTLEMEN, CAPITALISTS AND SETTLERS: A BRIEF RESPONSE

BY JIM McALOON
Lincoln University

Professor Hopkins’ generous response to my article provides an opportunity for further reflection on the argument which he and Professor Cain advanced at book-length in 1993 and on the subsequent debate.¹ First, though, a few of Hopkins’ comments on my own article might be briefly noted.

I should like to acknowledge, with apologies, an error of citation to which Hopkins drew my attention. In the original article, my notes 8 and 61 referred to p. 165 of volume one of the first edition of *British Imperialism*; that should have been p. 265.

Hopkins raises the issue of the representativeness of Canterbury and Otago within the New Zealand context. That is a fair question, but much of the North Island was a later frontier than the South. This might have meant a large proportion of reasonably substantial family farmers and country–town merchants in places like Wanganui and Hamilton, as well as smaller centres like Martinborough. Pastoralists were only strong in the eastern districts of Hawkes Bay and Wairarapa, although Auckland and Wellington were mercantile cities from the 1840s. It seems likely, however, that self-made capitalists dominated the North Island as they did the South. David Hamer’s work on colonial towns suggests as much.²

Hopkins refers to discussions of the colonial elite by Graham and Olssen, and more recently Belich, which differ from my own.³ The Graham and Olssen pieces were completed before my own work was developed.⁴ Belich, similarly, almost certainly completed his first volume before any of my work was available; it is, however, a little surprising that his second volume did not engage with or cite my views at all, which were available in thesis and article form. Although I may have been quite wrong in my arguments about the nature of the colonial upper class,

1 McAloon, Gentlemanly capitalism. As Hopkins notes, the 1993 edition of *British Imperialism* has been followed by a second edition; references in this article are to the second edition. It might clear up a little confusion if I note that all references in my original article were to the first edition, and Cain and Hopkins’ ‘Afterword’ which I also cited was the Afterword in Dumett, ed., *Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Imperialism*, not the Afterword in the second edition, Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688–2000*.


3 My own views have been fully developed in McAloon, *No Idle Rich*.

4 Graham, Settler society; Olssen, Towards a new society. In a later publication Olssen was kind enough to describe my work as ‘a valuable portrait of the wealthy and their world’: Olssen, *Building the New World*, p. 283, note 94.
and particularly on the relative unimportance of unearned income and leisure, these arguments have not yet been rebutted.5

Hopkins attributes to me the preference for the term ‘bourgeoisie’ rather than ‘middle class’ because, he says, the latter presumes the existence of a distinct upper class, which Hopkins has me saying New Zealand did not possess. This is not quite correct. What I argued (with inevitable simplification) was a two-part proposition:

1. Capitalists were generally part of the middle class in Britain, and could be called middle class because the upper class was still the hereditary landowning aristocracy and gentry; and
2. with no hereditary landowning aristocracy or gentry in New Zealand the upper levels of the capitalist class were the upper class. Logically they could not therefore be a middle class in New Zealand, whatever they had been in Britain.6

I accept that it is etymologically infelicitous to refer to pastoral capitalists as a bourgeoisie, but I had in mind Marx’ reference to ‘the two interests of the bourgeoisie, because big landed property in fact has been made completely bourgeois by the development of modern society, despite its feudal coquetry and racial pride’.7

The essential point was that the great majority of wealthy colonial capitalists neither came from gentlemanly backgrounds, nor operated as gentlemen in the colony. I accepted that Cain and Hopkins’ argument did not require settler capitalists to be gentlemen and that what counted was shared values, on which point settler societies had an advantage. But if these shared values were essentially those of honesty, trustworthiness, and reliability, and the English legal system, then these values were never the sole property of gentlemen. It is, I think, possible to stretch definitions too far, as I noted in my discussion of de Serville’s use of the term ‘gentleman’.8

Hopkins also points out that the desire to accumulate a family fortune was not confined to the British middle classes. Perhaps I should have made this point clearer: it was the way in which the colonial upper class accumulated family fortunes, and particularly the way in which they disposed of them, that were typically bourgeois.9 Among other things, I was attempting to understand the colonial upper class in its British, and imperial, context.

5 Belich, Making Peoples, p. 322; Belich, Paradise Reforged, pp. 126–33; McAloon, The colonial wealthy.
6 I owe the observation that a middle class has to be in the middle of something to Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, p. 41.
7 A slightly amended version of Marx, The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in Fernbach, ed., Surveys from exile, p. 174. This edition reads ‘has been completely bourgeoisified’ where I have substituted ‘has been made completely bourgeois’.
9 See, especially, Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes.
This is where I hoped to contribute to a discussion beyond New Zealand shores. Emphasising what they saw as the most important part of the imperial edifice, Cain and Hopkins perhaps necessarily under-emphasised other parts. As Hopkins noted in his masterly 1999 essay, the imperial British project ran to ‘a cast of many thousands whose wealth was derived directly from the world of empire and informal influence overseas’.\(^{10}\) It seemed to me worth emphasising that the cast extended well beyond the British Isles.

Much of the difference between us is about perspective, but some matters are a little more fundamental. Hopkins justifiably warned that my discussing *British Imperialism* alongside earlier writing on settler capitalism risked blurring important distinctions. I accept the analysis in *British Imperialism* allowed a considerable measure of autonomy to the dominions, including the development of local industry, and in having Cain and Hopkins echo Armstrong and Ehrensaft I implied otherwise. These points might have been better aimed.

However, Cain and Hopkins did characterise settler capitalists as a collaborating elite.\(^{11}\) This is certainly a similar view to that of other writers on settler capitalism, and in my view this understates the autonomy and assertiveness of settler capitalists and diminishes the importance of local circumstances and motivations. This is perhaps the most significant difference between us, and it is precisely at this point that the structure and nature of the colonial capitalist class becomes important. My suggestion was that the middle-class origins of the colonial capitalists did not predispose them meekly to accept metropolitan and gentlemanly attitudes. To distinguish between ‘dependent’ and ‘collaborating’ might seem a mere quibble. I think the distinction is important, though, and I think my discussion of the ways in which relative autonomy was negotiated highlights that distinction (which incidentally does not deny that Britain was the focus of New Zealand’s export economy until the 1960s).

Nor do I deny the fact that a gentlemanly elite, in the shape of Earl Grey and others, set the broad policy by which pastoral capitalism was implanted in New Zealand. But Earl Grey was susceptible, not only to the interests of London commercial gentlemen, well represented in the New Zealand Company, but also of those who aspired to extensive pastoral estates in New Zealand. The result was particularly beneficial for ambitious elements of the British middle classes, and the motivation of those who emigrated and made the settler empire needs to be understood alongside the grand strategy at the Colonial Office. The distinction is about a little more than that between tactics and strategy.

I agree with Hopkins that the Union and the Empire allowed Scots to ‘exchange political independence for economic advantage’, and that elite Scots adopted a gentlemanly culture within Britain. I would still suggest, however, that emigrant Scots (not usually being from the elite) operated in a different fashion.

---

in the settler colonies; it might also be relevant that my account of colonial capitalists found little difference between Scottish- and English-born. If the relationship between colonial capitalists and metropolitan gentlemen was frequently negotiated within certain parameters, and colonial capitalists were generally from the (non-metropolitan) middle classes, then another intriguing perspective is opened up: that the metropolitan gentlemen simultaneously negotiated things with provincial capitalists and with settler capitalists – who were the same sort of people. This might well be drawing too long a bow, but it has the advantage of seeing the British middle classes in context well beyond the island of Britain.

In terms of Cain and Hopkins’ emphasis on trade and services in imperial expansion, it might be worth cautioning against writing industrialism out of the picture – after all, at least until the dot.com boom, trade had to be in things. More specifically, and as I have already noted, the New Zealand export economy from the 1850s to the 1890s depended largely on a raw material for British industry.12 British industry was of fundamental importance for New Zealand’s development; not primarily because New Zealand was desired as a market, but because it was a source of a key raw material.

It was in this context that I criticised Cain and Hopkins’ description of the service sector as the advance guard of capitalism in the antipodes, and countered that such was hardly an accurate description of whalers and pastoralists. Hopkins confined his reply to a footnote: ‘our remarks were made at the outset of our study, and in the context of a discussion of industry and the manufacturing interest. Our aim at that point was simply to underline the fact that it was shippers and traders who carried manufactured goods and handled raw materials and shipping that transported people’. I accept the appeal to context, and agree with Cain and Hopkins that traders were the reconnaissance troops,13 but the settler colonies were initially only viable as producers of industrial raw materials. Trading profits, indeed, were often lucratively invested in pastoral enterprise, for instance by John Jones in East Otago, and the Rhodes brothers in Canterbury.

Hopkins emphasises that he and Cain were primarily concerned with ‘structural power, which is concerned with setting the rules of the game’, and which is distinguished from ‘relational power, which deals with the bargains struck within the framework set by the rules’. I accept this distinction and the propriety of Cain and Hopkins concentrating on the former. It is not my intention to suggest that because a grand theory does not account for everything it is therefore invalid, a line of reasoning which I have long found irritating, and I certainly accept their account of what those rules were. Hopkins has stressed that ‘what mattered was that there were sufficient shared values to enable the rules of the game to be understood and to function as smoothly as differences of perspective allowed’.

---

12 See Ville, *Rural Entrepreneurs*, p. 131, for some implications.
However, the differences of perspective might turn out to be quite a significant part of the story, as also the detail of specific regions. Much of my argument was in this area, and might be seen not so much as undermining the Cain and Hopkins thesis as complementing it.

More generally, I was interested in the relationship between structural and relational power. As Hopkins has said, the exercise of relational power may cause the rules themselves to change. Ritchie had considerable autonomy but this ‘did not change the structure of New Zealand’s dependence on Britain’. In one sense this is true, but it is also significant that the context of Ritchie’s virtual defiance of the ‘gentlemanly imbeciles’ on his board was the reorientation of the New Zealand export economy from large-scale pastoralism to smaller-scale mixed farming. Another example is the massive loan-funded development of the 1870s, master-minded by the decidedly ungentlemanly capitalist Julius Vogel. Although British rentiers had to be convinced to support such development, the resulting modernisation of New Zealand must have changed the balance of the relationship somewhat. The last resort is important, but so is what happens on the way to the last resort, and as the afterword to the second edition of *British Imperialism* makes clear, the need to concede some autonomy to the settler colonies was in the end a fatal contradiction that undermined the whole imperial edifice.\(^{14}\)

But finally to conclude, I hope, in tones as positive as those which characterise Hopkins’ reply. He and Cain not only restored economics to the centre of an increasingly discourse-driven imperial history, but approached British history in a global context. In so doing they have demonstrated by example how the history of settler colonies might likewise be written with attention to global context. While most of the propositions which I advanced in my earlier article were, as I am happy to emphasise, complementary of Cain and Hopkins’ work (if not of earlier work on settler capitalism), in the end the differences of opinion and emphasis between me and Cain and Hopkins are perhaps as follows:

1. I think it is inappropriate to describe settler capitalists as collaborators, whether prefabricated or otherwise. The term ‘collaborators’ understates the relative autonomy and the constant negotiation that characterised the position of settler capitalists, even though they ultimately operated within the rules set by the metropolitan gentlemen. I take a similar view of Cain and Hopkins’ description of settler Scots as adjutants rather than proconsuls, and these views are reinforced by my account of the middle-class origins of most settler capitalists.

2. My emphasis on the assertiveness and self-direction of settler capitalist agendas does not ultimately disturb Cain and Hopkins’ argument about the forces propelling imperialism, although it does suggest that other dimensions need to be examined, particularly the motivations and agendas of

those who emigrated to the settler colonies. This is so even if we agree on
the shortage of gentlemen in the settler colonies.

3. While trade was of fundamental importance in driving imperialism, as Cain
and Hopkins stress, it must not be forgotten that as far as New Zealand was
concerned this was trade in industrial raw materials. This means there was
more of a connection between British industry and the development of
settler colonies than might be inferred from British Imperialism (albeit this
connection was back-to-front from that argued by the traditional accounts
with which Cain and Hopkins engage).

If I suggest that Cain and Hopkins’ emphasis on ‘the social forces propelling
imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, the structures they created and the
rules they established to police the emerging world system’ does not cover all
essential factors in the development of settler colonies, or at least of New Zealand,
their account goes a long way in that direction. Above all, it has given a great
impetus to the revival of settler capitalism as an analytical framework, and has
in concrete terms encouraged scholars to consider settler capitalism in the context
of a British world.

REFERENCES

Belich, J. (1996), Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the
Belich, J. (2001), Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000 (Auck-
cinson).
York: Longman).
Fox-Genovese, E. (1988), Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel
Graham, J. (1992), Settler society. In G.W. Rice, ed., The Oxford History of New Zealand (Auckland: Ox-
ford University Press).
University Press).
Frontier (New York: Columbia University Press).
Hopkins, A. G. (1999), Back to the future: from national history to imperial history. Past and Present,
McAlloon, J. (1995), The colonial wealthy in Canterbury and Otago: no idle rich. New Zealand Journal of
History, 30: 43–60.
McAlloon, J. (2002), Gentlemanly capitalism and settler capitalists. Australian Economic History Review,
42: 204–23.
McAlloon, J. (2002), No Idle Rich: The Wealthy in Canterbury & Otago 1840–1914 (Dunedin: Otago Uni-
versity Press).
Marx, K. (1973), The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. In D. Fernbach, ed, Surveys from Exile
(Harmondsworth: Penguin).

