



‘Against the Envy of Less Happier Lands’. British Federalism and the Search for a New Role for Britain, 1884-1949

Jens Norrby

Centre for European Research (CERGU)

University of Gothenburg
Box 711, SE 405 30 GÖTEBORG

February 2019

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Introduction

This is not a dissertation on the history of Brexit. What it is, however, is a study of a period when Britain lost her role in global politics and was forced into the search for another. To the extent that this search for Britain's post-imperial role was ever completed, it was resumed on the 23rd of June 2016.

Even if questions of identity and self-understanding seems not to have been what drove people to the polls of the Brexit referendum,¹ the more historically minded commentators argues that to understand the fact that the referendum was called at all one must take into account a wide-spread sense of nostalgia for a better past. Political Scientist John Curtice argues that 'Britain had, in truth, never really taken Europe to its heart' because, lurking 'there, however, in the background was also the underlying question of identity.'² To Political Scientist Michael Kenny, the English question of identity was actualised already after World War II. It is in the vacuum after the loss of vast external territories that England and Britain has had to find a new sense of self during the second half of twentieth century. It is not that the voters went to the polls primarily fuelled by nationalism, but that the 'language of English disenfranchisement' lent momentum to the whole Brexit campaign.³ 'Without the cadences, rhetorical flourishes and mental frameworks associated with a loose form of English nationalism, the referendum campaign would have felt and sounded very different.'⁴ Similarly, Politician Stephen Green argues in his *Brexit and the British*, that there was a Churchillian rhetoric and nostalgic way of thinking that characterised the whole process leading up to the referendum. Even the Remain side often fell to describing EU in terms of England's least bad alternative and focused on the economic consequences of leaving the union rather than on the positives of staying in.⁵

¹ See for example MATTHEW J. GOODWIN & OLIVER HEATH, 'The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-Level Analysis of the Result', *The Political Quarterly*, 87/3 (2016), pp. 326-31 and HAROLD D. CLARKE, MATTHEW GOODWIN & PAUL WHITELEY, 'Why Britain Voted for Brexit: An Individual-Level Analysis of the 2016 Referendum Vote', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 70/3 (2017), pp. 443-44.

² JOHN CURTICE, 'Brexit: Behind the Referendum', *Political Insight*, 7/2 (2016), pp. 4, 6.

³ MICHAEL KENNY, 'The Genesis of English Nationalism', *ibid.* (pp. 9-11).

⁴ KENNY, 'The Genesis of English Nationalism', p. 8.

⁵ A strategy labelled as 'Project Fear' by its opponents.

The late Empire and World War II is in contemporary political rhetoric often used—explicitly or implicitly—as a reference point, a time when Britain was defining global politics, trading freely with whomever one desired, ‘had control’ and ‘mattered’: a period remembered as the last time when Great Britain was truly great. A period when Great Britain was not dependant on Europe but instead was close to her true affinities: leading a vibrant Commonwealth and maintaining a strong ‘special relationship’ with the US. Underlying these assumptions lies often the sentiment—so succinctly put by Dean Acheson in 1962—that ‘Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role.’⁶ This dissertation revolves around this ‘losing of an imperial role’ and the subsequent search for a new one, a search studied through the eyes of the tradition that would become known as British federalism. The title is a quote from a John of Gaunt monologue in the second act of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and is here chosen to reflect the sense of exceptionalism that has played such an important part in Britain’s understanding of its place in the world.⁷

British federalism is an intellectual tradition centred on the conviction of the merits of a supranational government.⁸ Its roots can be traced back to the 1820s, but its history is perhaps best concretised through understanding its three main organisations: the Imperial Federation League, founded in 1884; the Round Table, founded in 1910; and Federal Union, founded in 1939. This study argues that in order to understand the driving forces of this tradition one must understand it as a continuous reaction to the continuous dissolution of the British Empire. What has previously been interpreted as radical breaks between these three organisations can through the contextualisation of Britain’s imperial decline be understood rather as necessary adaptations in responding to a transforming dilemma. I argue that the continuity of the tradition of British federalism is to be found in its constant search for a post-imperial role. As such, Britain’s federalists act as an early, serious and tenacious example of attempting to solve a problem that on some level still haunts the British self-understanding.

Aim & Questions

This thesis aims to study the British Federalist tradition and the economic as a reaction to the economic and political dissolution of the British Empire. It argues that the different phases of British Federalism are best explained as alter-

⁶ From a Speech at West Point in December 1962. Acheson had at that point retired from his earlier position as United States Secretary of States.

⁷ Within the passage, John of Gaunt reflects upon the insular position of the British isles, both shielding and distancing its inhabitants from their continental neighbours.

⁸ That is, the union of existing nations under the umbrella of a larger governmental structure divided into two levels. The supranational level governs common issues and the individual members governs local issues, each independently from the other.

ations corresponding to the successive deterioration of Britain's imperial conditions. Through the overarching context of imperial decline, I argue that what has been previously considered separate stages of British federalism (each acting within fundamentally different political contexts) are rather consecutive adaptations to the ongoing deterioration that the British Empire experienced from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. While previous research has tended to portray British federalism as an inward-looking tradition focusing on the still remaining qualities of the British, I study it as a tradition looking outwards—to the allies most suitable to compensate for Britain's sudden lack.

Thus, my study treats the struggle for a global identity as one of the fundamental constants of British Federalism: as one of its constitutive elements. Contrary to previous research, I argue that it is through this search for a role that one best understands both the transformations and the continuity of the tradition. Since British Federalism's various phases are best explained by their correspondence to the shifting challenges to Britain's global identity, each distinct supranational vision is also united by their shared impetus, the struggle to save the very same identity. To study this relationship my reading is governed by three questions. First, what state of the Empire was depicted—explicitly and implicitly—in federalist writings? Second, what post-imperial role for Britain did federalists promote? Third, what qualities were the federalists seeking in Britain's future allies?

The Object of Study: the British Federalist Matrix

To define 'British Federalism' has proved itself quite an elaborate feat and the two previous attempts at understanding it as an intellectual tradition (and not, for example, studies restricted to a single organisation) have gone completely different directions. John Kendle's *Federal Britain: A History* is a study of the history of the federalist idea and its separate expressions throughout Britain's history. As such, the book covers everyone that adhered to ideas that Kendle recognises as federalism, even though the ideas may have very little in common and their creators were driven by very different motivations and visions. Burgess' *The British Tradition of Federalism*, on the other hand, is structured around Burgess own theoretical concept of a 'tradition'. This federalist tradition shares some central ideological traits, but more importantly it can be shown to have some continuity—both in its motivations and in several key actors.

My approach is closer to Burgess', but in an attempt at achieving greater theoretical clarity I define British Federalism as a product of a matrix of three factors: ideas, organisations and people—or, rather: federalism, federalist organisations and federalists. Throughout the period I study, these three factors have always cooperated to unite the tradition and between its separate phases, different factors were crucial in maintaining the continuity through its transitions.

This is not to say that my study attempts to comprehensively study all of the organisations and people that are brought up as part of my tracing of the federalist idea. This is a study firmly grounded within the discipline of History of Ideas and both federalist organisations and federalists are only studied to the extent that they are the sources of federalist ideas. This is neither a biographical nor a sociological study, but rather one that understands ideas as something grounded in the social reality where they originate. The biographical context of the individuals and the sociological character of the organisations are studied to the extent that it elucidates the meaning of the ideas they produced.

Lastly, it needs to be stressed that not every individual and organisation was *equally* crucial to the development of the federalist tradition. Some organisations, and even a couple of individuals, acted at times as the hub of the entire tradition, while some are brought up in the study more as examples of significant aspects of federalism in a certain period. This discrepancy is reflected both in the varying length of the chapters,⁹ and in the difference in attention attributed to them in this introductory chapter.

Federalism

As previously stated there is none of the three aspects that in a consistent way have secured a continuity throughout the period I study, and a definition of the idea of federalism spanning from start to finish needs to overcome some quite severe ruptures. Consequently, my definition of the federalism as a concept is vague to the point of ambiguity, but becomes meaningful in conjunction with the other factors of the matrix.

An analytical definition of federalism that is representative for all of the organisations and federalists that I study needs to be reduced to the absolute bare essentials. That is, perhaps the most essential and simple core of the federalist message: Britain needs to become a member state in a larger union/state, a.k.a. supranationalism. The federalists studied here are all of a centralising disposition (wanting to unite existing states in larger units), rather than advocates of decentralisation (wanting to split up existing states into smaller units). In most cases the proposed union is of a strictly federalist nature, i.e. the sovereignty is divided between the two levels of government and in their designated areas each level is independent from the other. However, while everyone subscribes to a supranationalist position, there are several examples of ‘federalists’ not promoting the idea of distinctly divided sovereignty.¹⁰ Beyond these fundamental assumptions, the idea transforms almost beyond recognition during the period I study. The variation of ideas when it comes to the proposed union’s area, purpose, division of mandates between governmental levels, creation and

⁹ The biggest difference can be seen in chapter three and six, which are both of a more summarising nature.

¹⁰ Thus ending up with something rather on the lines of EU.

timeframe prohibits an analytical definition to go beyond the basic assumption of a two-level government.¹¹

From the view of a historical definition of the concept of federalism, the predominant majority of the federalists I study use the term to describe themselves. There are, however, those—particularly in the Round Table—that understand themselves as promoting an *organic union* rather than a *federation*. These play, as I will show through the continuity of people and organisations, an integral part within the intellectual tradition of federalism, without prescribing to the term itself. Similarly, there are those that proclaim themselves rather ‘pro-Commonwealth’ than pro-federation, but still contributes to the federalist idea.

Another solution, which would circumvent the watered down meaning of the analytical definition, is to simply label them as *supranationalists*. I will address supranational elements of the federalist ideology when relevant, but there are two reasons that I keep with the term *federalists*: (a) it is what most of these people would have labelled themselves and, most importantly, (b) it is in line with previous research. *Federalism* is evocative to a larger audience and recognisable as the tradition that I study, both to previous scholars and to its participants.

Even though this notable lack of consistency renders the ideological content unfit to define the federalist intellectual tradition in my study on its own, it would be unwise to dismiss it completely. In the shorter term the ideas exhibit greater continuity and in several cases long term influence is evident. The intellectual tradition is built around these ideas but in order to avoid the message of those ideas to be reduced to something general to the point of unmeaning, organisations and people need to be taken into account in order to give the tradition an unbroken continuity.

Federalist Organisations

British Federalism manifests itself in three main organisations, the Imperial Federation League, The Round Table and Federal Union. Additionally, I study the British Empire League and the New Commonwealth League as more fringe contributors to the larger tradition. They are each presented here individually to convey a sense of their general character.

The Imperial Federation League was founded in 1884, largely as a continuation of a widespread reaction to the elevation of several colonies to the status of ‘self-governing’. This in combination with economic recession caused an

¹¹ A contributing reason to this, apart from the lengthy period of study, is that both Imperial Federation League and Federal Union presented their central messages deliberately vague to the point that people of vastly different opinions could still consider themselves part of the same cause. See MICHAEL BURGESS, *The British Tradition of Federalism*, Studies in Federalism Series; London: Leicester University Press (1995) and JENS RAMBERG, ‘Vague but Simple to Grasp. A Study of the Intellectual Production of Federal Union 1938-1945’, Master thesis (University of Gothenburg, 2016) respectively.

acute sense of the Empire's decline, and paved way for an organisation to promote closer imperial ties. 1884 also marks the beginning of this study, as it is the first time public support for the concept of British federalism was evident. It was, however, hard from the very beginning for the Imperial Federation League to agree on to what extent the proposed union should actually be 'imperial' and to what extent 'federal', a problem that was solved largely by keeping the message vague enough not to exclude any position. In the long term this was unsurprisingly a faulty strategy and by 1892 the organisation called to a conference to formulate something more concrete. When that failed the organisation's momentum was gone and it had little to no choice but to disband in 1893.

The Imperial Federation League was perhaps most defined by its decentralised nature. With its membership squarely based in the gentry and with a central message kept deliberately vague, the organisation refrained from strict hierarchy or excessive bureaucracy. This allowed the organisation to grow to a decent size and by the end of 1886 the membership counted upwards 800, represented in eight branches spread across the Empire. These branches were, however, founded through local initiatives and apart from the occasional vote and subscribing to the common journal, the contact with the main branch was rather weak. Even the finances were handled rather loosely, with 95% of all journal issues delivered without charge by the end of 1886, and a constant budget deficit that was kept in check only by generous donations from a 'few gentlemen' up until 1891.¹² This lack of structure, both at the level of ideology and of financial management, contributed heavily to the League's downfall.

Within the public, the Imperial Federation League was primarily concerned with spreading their message, and less so with strategies for immediate political influence. From the very beginning the organisation set out to organise lectures, distribute publications, gather (favourable) statistics, becoming a forum for intra-imperial discussion and later publishing a monthly journal—rather than lobbying or proposing a motion.¹³ Additionally, their decentralised organisation prevented them from becoming a fruitful intra-imperial forum since the connections between the branches were so loose. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that the League was uninterested in political influence altogether, but it was not their main priority. In the typology of Bert Klandermans, the Imperial Federation League was a secondary pressure group: primarily focused on being a social context for imperial federalist information and secondarily concerned with influencing 'the formulation and implementation of public

¹² When the donations were discontinued, General Meeting (1887) Minutes Executive & Genreal 1887-1891: Add. MS. 62779, British Library, London and Financial Committee Report (1891) Minutes Executive & Council 1891 Add. Ms. 62780, British Library, London.

¹³ First meeting of the Provisional Committee (29th July 1884) Minutes Executive & General 18/9 1884-20/12 1886: Add. MS. 62778, British Library, London, pp. 4-5 and General Meeting (11th June 1885) Minutes Executive & General 18/9 1884 - 20/12 1886: Add. MS. 62778, British Library, London.

policy'.¹⁴ Even if they never became influential in the political sphere, they were able to act as a growing ground for ideas that shaped what British Federalism would come to be.

Founded in 1895, the British Empire League was a self-proclaimed successor to the Imperial Federation League that was led by Lord John Lubbock, Lord Roberts and Lord Strathcona. With a similar socioeconomic foundation as its 'predecessor', the British Empire League set out to be a more focused pressure group, stressing the social aspects of imperial cooperation. As an example, the organisation argued for the introduction of an imperial penny post at several colonial conferences.¹⁵ It also helped mobilise troops during both the Boer War and World War I. With a rather small membership it sought the unity that the Imperial Federation League had lacked through restricting the ambitions to certain areas.

Even though the Round Table was founded in 1910, its inception really stemmed from the Second Boer War and the Southern African colonial administration. The High Commissioner for Southern Africa at the time, Alfred Milner, surrounded himself with a close staff most often referred to as Milner's Kindergarten. By the creation of the Union of South Africa in May 1910 most of the Kindergarten had moved back to England and the Round Table was founded the same fall as a means to translate their shared experiences to the imperial context. Its first ten years were of course dominated by the experiences of the Great War, which together with the rising power of USA and increasingly fervent colonial nationalism demanded most of the Table's resources. By the end of the war the organisation began distance itself from the federalist mindset and adopt a much more general pro-commonwealth attitude, a transformation that was complete around the beginning of the Second World War.

The Round Table shared some distinct similarities with Imperial Federation League in a membership firmly based in the gentry and an organisation structured around branches representing the separate Dominions. However, even if one would be hard pressed to describe the Table as a centralised organisation, it did not suffer from the same lack of structure as its predecessor. I have not been able to get any exact data on membership numbers but it was in the same vicinity as the League, ranging from the 500s up to around a thousand members, albeit divided on a larger number of branches (some with as few as five members). In order to connect all of these, there were two distinct aspects of the organisation set up that were completely essential. Firstly, the core of the organisation was extremely small, but also superbly in tune with each other. The close bonds of Milner's Kindergarten allowed the Moot (the highest decision making instance) to run a remarkably tight ship for an organisation upon which the sun never set. Additionally, some central figures (most prominently

¹⁴ BERT KLANDERMANS, *The Social Psychology of Protest*, Hoboken: Wiley (1997) pp. 14-17.

¹⁵ Extending the area to where one could send a letter for only a penny to the entire empire.

Lionel Curtis), were almost constantly travelling and actually met many of the members in person. Secondly, whereas *Imperial Federation: The Journal of the Imperial Federation League* was largely a one-way communication from the main office, *The Round Table* always included pieces from each of the Dominions, actually supporting something on the lines of an intra-imperial forum.

Even though all five of the Federalist organisations were public interest groups as defined by Jeffrey Berry—i.e. fighting for something perceived to be the good for all, not limited to the interest of a certain profession nor investor—the fact remains that the Round Table was founded by a group with the same professional background.¹⁶ This argument is offset by the rest of the membership base's variation, but the organisation maintained a distinct administrative perspective on most questions. Whereas the League was a much more scattered collection of different shades of imperialism, the Table was born out of a shared experience and understanding that lent them an almost singular vision: a unity and precision that survived the influx of members without the same experiences.

This unity and resolve in combination with its high ranking members allowed the Round Table to aim directly for political policy. Thus, the Table was a primary pressure group rather than a secondary, and even though it published a journal, several flyers, memorandums, gave lectures etc., its focus was on political influence. To this end they engaged in both indirect lobbying (mainly releasing research), but also what Berry describes as lobbying through constituents (i.e. not the organisation as a whole, but singular influential members who attempt to influence key policy makers). In some cases, the members were even part of the government themselves (such as Philip Kerr and Alfred Milner), which rendered lobbying superfluous altogether. In sum, the Table's streamlined message and powerful members allowed it to aim directly at political power.

The New Commonwealth Society was more of a federalist adjacent than explicitly federalist organisation, but its pacifist ambitions led its members to a lots of similar conclusions to their federalist counterparts. It was an international organisation founded in 1932, with branches in Germany and France, with a socio-culturally elite member base similar to Imperial Federation League and the Round Table. Perhaps better characterised as a think-tank than a pressure group, a lot of the organisations' attention went into the monthly *New Commonwealth* and (from 1935) *New Commonwealth Quarterly*. Their promotion of the League of Nations and multilateral conflict resolution attracted the attention from some rather significant names, most importantly Winston Churchill and Otto Neurath, who both became members. This allowed, of course, for de facto political influence, even if the organisation did not commit to proper lobbying itself.

¹⁶ JEFFREY M. BERRY, *Lobbying for the People. The Political Behavior of Public Interest Groups*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1977) pp. 6-11.

Founded in 1938, Federal Union sprung out of three young men's frustration with the Munich agreement. Charles Kimber, Patrick Ransome and Dereck Rawnsley founded the organisation and fuelled by the threat of war it grew explosively. The organisation peaked in 1941 with the Foreign Office's proposal for an Anglo-French union which was ultimately foiled by Hitler's occupation of Paris. The success began waning and by the end of the war the organisation decided to focus exclusively on a European federation, alienating a major part of the membership base. The organisation still exists, promoting supranational union, particularly in Europe, but it has never found back to the dynamic power it was in the beginning of World War II.

Both ideologically and structurally, Federal Union represented a stark contrast to its predecessors and perhaps most significantly: it is not an organisation based in the gentry. Two years after its foundation the organisation boasted over 10000 members distributed over 253 local branches, a popular support that reached beyond the ones most well off.¹⁷ As such, Federal Union can almost be described as what Klandermans designates as a social movement: 'populated by individuals sharing collective goals and collective identity who engage in disruptive collective action.'¹⁸ One would be hard pressed to argue that Federal Union's actions were truly collective, but the fact that the definition otherwise fits quite well is illustrative in comparison with the other organisations. Additionally, the similarity to a social movement tells us something of the centripetal forces of the organisation. I would argue that while the League was united by a shared notion of imperialism and the Table by a shared interest in the strengthening of imperial administration and bureaucracy, Federal Union members were brought together by a shared identity as internationalists. Similarly to the League, their central message was deliberately vague, but whereas Imperial Federation League members at least agreed on the solution more generally (though struggling with its oxymoronic nature), Federal Union members were only in agreement on the problem (Nation-State sovereignty). When it comes to solutions, Federal Union members promoted everything from a liberal to a communist to a Christian union. The reason for Federal Union's success was that they identified a problem that resonated with people and which they wanted to take part in solving, albeit in different ways.

The large and diversified membership base demanded a much greater administrative efficiency of FU than of its predecessors. As a result, the authority of the organisation was divided enough not to be stemming from a few influential individuals, even if there were several renowned members. They had a research institute (simply known as Federal Union Research Institute or FURI), a large board of Directors, and a separate board for their newspaper, etc. — all

¹⁷ RICHARD MAYNE & JOHN PINDER, *Federal Union: The Pioneers: A History of Federal Union*, New York: St. Martin's Press (1990) p. 25.

¹⁸ KLANDERMANS, *The Social Psychology of Protest* p. 2.

to elevate the organisation above any singular individual. Since FU did not promote imperial federation, they never attempted to act intra-imperially, and both their newspaper and their branches instead acted to overcome the socioeconomic differences of its overwhelmingly UK membership base. As such, the branches were seated in the UK and *Federal Union News* distinctly lacked most characteristics of a journal and was rather dominated by letters to the editor and local takes on the federalist issue, with only the occasional article from members connected to the core of the organisation.

As a public interest group, FU was the only of the three organisations that can actually boast with anything kin to a ‘public’ membership base. Similarly to the Table, FU was a primary pressure group, but with slightly different means at its disposal. Lacking the influential members, the organisation’s lobbying through constituents was much more focused on letter writing and public protest. However, while the ‘research’ that the Table produced amounted to some scattered statistics and claimed ‘perspective of experts’, FURI actually published a substantial amount of serious studies in order to influence decision makers. When it came to its secondary function as a social context, Federal Union distinguished itself from its predecessors in that it in many ways was a dual organisation. The core (structured around the board and FURI) seldom mixed with the branches, and while the research produced came almost exclusively from FURI, the newspaper consisted predominantly of contributions from the branches. Consequently, the primary function of lobbying and the secondary function of social context was in Federal Union distinctly separated from each other, something that would have been completely alien to the other organisations. This division is one of the factors contributing to the organisation failing to unite behind one vision.

I would argue that it is the organisations described here that qualifies British federalism as an intellectual tradition and not just a series of people with similar ideas—they gave it the body of a proper tradition. Even if it is not the matter of this thesis study in what way this was achieved, the “ideological weight” of the organisations is significant when studying the ideas they produced.

Federalists

There are ten federalists that are studied in more detail as representations of British federalism and the dilemmas it struggled with at the time. William Edward Forster, Edward Freeman, Arthur James Balfour, Alfred Milner, Philip Kerr, Lionel Curtis, David Davies, Harold Laski, Patrick Ransome and Barbara Wootton. What follows are short presentations intended to give a grasp of their immediate context and significance.

When the Right Honourable William Edward Forster (1818–1886) founded the Imperial Federation League in 1884, he was already well-known in political circles. His interest for imperial affairs had been sparked already in his role as Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies in the late sixties, but it

was not until after his prominent role as a liberal statesman during the sixties and seventies he turned to the extra-parliamentary politics of the Imperial Federation League.¹⁹ He founded the League only two years before his passing, but his detailed insight into imperial affairs in combination with his aptitude for political vision made sure his impact on the organisation was felt long after 1886.

If Forster was the unconditionally loving parent of the Imperial Federation League, Historian Edward Augustus Freeman (1823–1892) was the ever-scrutinising older sibling. As Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, Freeman’s delicate understanding of political language repeatedly forced the other members to fine-tune their message. He was the first one to notice the Imperial Federation League’s fundamental problem as the vagueness of its vision (something that would eventually lead to its downfall), an issue he attempted to combat with various arguments until his death.

The most influential person in the British Empire League was never any of its founders, but rather one of its vice-presidents: Arthur James Balfour, 1st Earl of Balfour (1848–1930). He was already a political force to be reckoned with in 1895—for example leading the Conservative Party in the House of Commons since 1891—and it only went upwards from there. In 1902 he became Prime Minister (he was succeeded by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannermann in 1905) and he acted as Foreign Secretary 1916–1919. It is not that he was instrumental in shaping the British Empire League per se, but his extensive political influence made his impact on the federalist tradition as a whole significant.

To the extent that Alfred Milner, 1st Viscount Milner (1854–1925), was a federalist it was by proxy—particularly during the period he exemplifies in this thesis (1893–1910). He began his career as a journalist (after an education in law) but he soon turned to politics. His success was as a statesman and colonial administrator and he made his legacy as High Commissioner of Southern Africa during the time of the Second Boer War. It was in political administration and not theory that his expertise lied, but the ideas that he passed on to his ‘Kindergarten’ during their years in South Africa would prove to exert their influence far beyond the practical circumstances they originated from.

Philip Henry Kerr, 11th Marquess of Lothian (1882–1940), is probably the person with the single most influence on the tradition of British federalism. Part of the Kindergarten and one of the founders of the Round Table, he was the first editor of the journal *The Round Table* from 1910 to 1917. He was an editor and a politician all his life but he never really held any high office except for his time as David Lloyd George’s private secretary (1916–1921). His real contribution to was in his ardent work for Britain’s international relations as a lecturer, a writer and during the last years of his life as the ambassador to the

¹⁹ He was perhaps most famous for his encouraging of using lethal force against the Land League in Ireland, an episode that would earn him the nickname ‘Buckshoot’ Forster.

US. He was an early and prominent voice arguing that Britain needed to look beyond the Empire and to tend to all of its international relations.

Second only to Kerr in influence, and one of his best friends, was Lionel George Curtis (1872–1955). Their career paths were exceedingly similar up until 1910, where Curtis diverged in a slightly more academic direction than Kerr's political career, turning into a devout scholar on the Empire. In 1912, he became Beit lecturer in colonial history at the University of Oxford and he wrote two massive books on the history of England that were published in 1915 and 1916. When imperialism became less fashionable after the war, and Kerr turned to international relations, Curtis kept promoting what he deemed the true qualities of the Empire: democracy, civilisation, liberalism, etc. His legacy is most visible in the think-tank Chatham House, where he played a key role in its founding, and his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947.

David Davies, 1st Baron Davies (1880–1944), was a Welch politician, industrialist and philanthropist with an avid interest in international relations.²⁰ Of all the federalists here, he is probably the least federalist and his inclusion is very much illustrative of a certain aspect of British federalism during the 1930s. NCS, which Davies founded, was not a federalist organisation by any strict definition of the term but worked closely with both the Round Table and Federal Union. When imperial federalism became unpalatable, it basically split in two. Davies represents the Commonwealth route: keeping with preserving Britain's great history, but discarding a lot of the supranational elements of the theory.

If Davies represents the Commonwealth route, then Harold Joseph Laski (1893–1950) represents the opposite route, the route of Nation-State sovereignty critique. Laski was not a self-proclaimed federalist, but his thinking contains a lot of the fundamental building blocks of what would become the ideology of Federal Union in the 1940s. In a wider context, he is famous as a Marxist theorist and for his political contribution within the Labour Party. His influence on British federalism stems from his impact on one of his students, a certain Patrick Ransome.

Patrick Ransome (birth-death), was critical in the founding of Federal Union in that it was he who pushed for a thoroughly federalist message.²¹ It was as a student of Laski in the thirties that he developed the confidence in the merits of a federal system of government. Beyond the importance of his theoretical insight, he contributed greatly to the administration of the organisation. Most notably he edited two books that attempted to capture the multifarious character of Federal Union, allowing the expression of a number of different perspectives on federalism.

²⁰ The fact that he is the only non-English among the federalists brought up here is telling of how 'British' federalism for the most part has been an English affair.

²¹ From the beginning, the suggested name was Pax Union.

Lastly, there is Barbara Wootton, Baroness Wootton of Abinger (1897–1988), prominent sociologist and criminologist. She was President for the British Sociological Association and created a Life Peer in 1958. She was an active member in Federal Union and chaired its research committee for many years. She is particularly interesting in that context since she was a devout socialist and her take on federalism was very much of a socialist complexion. Her theories really mark the stark contrasts between different shades of members attracted to Federal Union.

Immediately, there will be some things that strike the reader of these biographical notes. Firstly, this group of people was in total educated at three universities. Ransome attained his education under Laski at LSE and the other nine were educated either at Oxford or Cambridge. This fact places this study firmly within the field of intellectual history and gives a sense of the socioeconomic character of the leading figures of British federalism. Secondly, continuing on the socioeconomic nature of these characters, six out of ten came from peerage. In that sense, this is clearly a history of the elite. Lastly, these are not political philosophers nor political theorists in a traditional sense. They are perhaps best characterised as theorists of the middle-range, as understood by Robert Merton. Theirs are not general, all-encompassing theories, but rather specific theories founded in a certain empirical context (while still being generalised beyond the immediate context of day-to-day work).²² They do not inhabit the lofty heights of political canon but are not just cogs in the bureaucratic machinery either. They were influential within the British debate, often well-known in the right circles, but most lacked any significant international reach. In the end, policy was their concern more than anything else.

There are three reasons that conspire to allow these individuals to shape British federalism in a significant and lasting sense. Firstly, the program of the federalist organisations were—as most are—strongly defined by a few key members’ views and priorities. Some of these persons even held salaried positions, which of course made the top-down character of an organisation based in members acting on their spare time even more pronounced. Secondly, even though the federalist idea at times enjoyed popular support, the idea’s inherent complexity prevented most people from understanding the finer detail, in turn allowing those few who truly grasped the ideas to spread their own versions. Lastly, no organisation, arguably with the exception of Federal Union, became influential enough to dramatically outweigh the influence of some members’ networks. Friends in the right places made certain members completely invaluable to their organisations, and as far as political influence goes, it is perhaps

²² ROBERT K. MERTON, *Social Theory and Social Structure* 3rd edn.; New York: The Free Press (1968) pp. 39–45. It should be mentioned that Merton’s definition of sociological theories as ‘middle-range’ is an extremely wide one. Almost all but the most grandiose theoretical claims are off course connected to a certain number of cases. In this context, ‘middle-range’ is rather telling of the framing of the federalist theories. These people presented federalism as a solution to specific problems in their time rather than as a generally applicable cure-all.

through these personal interactions that British federalism has made its deepest mark.

Hence, certain individuals have been essential to the history of British Federalism and have played an important part in transferring ideas and maintaining continuity in between organisations. These individuals were not necessarily at the top of the organisation's hierarchies (but some were), and their ideas were not necessarily in line with the general federalist sentiment of the time. The reason that I will look closer at the ideas of certain federalists is that their ideas helped shaping the Federalist tradition while stemming from—and only become comprehensible in the context of—their respective individual intellectual endeavours. To understand these ideas, they must be studied as part of the set of convictions from which they were born. Additionally, there are certain transitional periods when British Federalism is best represented, not in a certain organisation nor a specific set of ideas, but rather a few select people. Through the three categories of federalism, federalist organisation and federalists I have attempted to define the object of study. Let us now turn to the context needed to understand this object.

The Deterioration of Britain's Imperial Conditions

The scholarly debate on the decline of Britain and the British Empire has with time grown to mammoth proportions. Depending on what one perceives as the essence of Britain's downfall different scholars argue for widely different periods and causes of decline. While this study draws immensely on the field of British 'declinology', the essential breaking point of the British economy/imperial ambitions is not of as much interest here. Rather, the federalist context was dependant on the changing conditions for the imperial enterprise, fundamentally as well as superficially. This study assumes that the conditions for the British Empire deteriorated through a long-drawn process that went through three distinct stages over the period of study. After developing what I denominate as 'imperial conditions', this chapter will explain what historical circumstances that formed the stages and what changes in conditions that characterises them—in turn influencing the contemporary federalist reaction.

Imperial Conditions

As Jim Tomlinson points out, most British 'declinology' has been based on a perceived economic decline.²³ There are those that want to explain these economic slumps through ideological shifts, but in the end weakening economic performance seems to be the consensus way of measuring the end result of

²³ JIM TOMLINSON, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain*, Harlow: Longman (2000) pp. 65-66.

decline.²⁴ This economic decline is then, to various extent, tied to the dissolution of the empire. When studying shorter periods, there are scholars that have looked specifically at the dissolution of the Empire apart from general economic decline, but the longer history of the Empire always becomes a history of the national economy as well. This is not surprising, since the weakening of Britain's economic performance undoubtedly was one of the prime causes for Britain's inability to maintain the imperial organisation. For the purposes of this study, however, the causes behind why the conditions worsened for Britain's imperial enterprise is of less importance since that in turn is already used as contextual backdrop to the tradition of federalism. Thus, this thesis will focus on the deterioration of Britain's imperial conditions rather than its decline more generally, looking into the circumstances that during the period 1880–1949 drastically reduced Britain's ability to act out a worldwide imperial mission. Britain's imperial enterprise failed in the face of the deterioration of two kinds of conditions: economic and ideological.

As such, this study engages with economic decline only to the extent that it is directly connected to the economic conditions for Britain's imperial role. Britain's economic performance was in several ways tied to her imperial success in that it granted her influence through the countries that depended on her, through her financial role that the Sterling and the city of London played for a long time, through the substantial investment that went into the Empire and through supporting both an actual army but also the myth of an army that mercilessly defended the Queen's steady-growing dominions.

Apart from economic performance, Britain's imperial project was also fuelled by an ideological conviction whose weakening correlates strongly with the Empire's failure (even if the causality goes both ways). Some of the most illustrative expressions of this weakening were imperial declinism, colonial nationalism, antiracism and globalism. These processes took place both within and without Britain and weakened her political resolute and legitimacy respectively. Unsurprisingly, the British federalist message always strived to be tailored to the ideological landscape of its time, in which the status of the Empire was crucial.

Outside of these two predominant aspects of imperial conditions, there are a few outliers. There were, for example, some more or less exclusively military conditions that were getting worse, such as Britain's dependence on the US during World War II. However, the end result in these cases are reducible to a worsening of either an economic or an ideological condition. By 1949, the deterioration of these two sets of conditions had drastically reduced Britain's 'ability to make itself felt in world politics'.²⁵

²⁴ See for example PAUL WARWICK, 'Did Britain Change? An Inquiry into the Causes of National Decline', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20/1 (1985) or BERNARD PORTER, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850-1970*, London: Longman (1975).

²⁵ TOMLINSON, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain* p. 1.

Phases of Decline

Without repeating too much of what is later gone through in the analytical chapters, I need to define a little further what I mean by the deterioration of Britain's imperial conditions. I would argue that British imperial 'decline' can be understood as going through, largely, three distinct phases.

The first phase, 1846–1914,²⁶ marks the first signs of trouble: Britain passing its vertex. Not all, but many scholars agree that there was a period after the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) when Britain was—politically and economically—'on top'. Different scholars argue for different starting points of the erosion of this foundation but commonly brought up is the Corn Laws in 1846. These opened Britain up to increased international competition, a fact that was responded to by in the long-term rather unhealthy investment patterns, undermining the industrial strength on which the Empire depended.

These changes are, however, clear only in hindsight, and a wider public most certainly did not notice anything. For those who did notice worrying signs at the time (and I would argue that many of the federalists were among them), no sane person could imagine where it would lead them. For the time being, Britain's unmatched financial position, in combination with its incredible industrial head start, easily made up for any shortcomings in domestic investment.

In the second phase, 1914–1941, the unbalance became harder to manage. This was a period of overcomings, when Britain lost its lead even if it remained one of the great powers of the world. The Great War brought with it almost equally great costs, causing some creaking at the joints in Britain's unhealthy economy. USA passed Britain already during the war (arguably even before), and the British emerged out of the trenches distinctly second place. However, the lack of domestic investment had caused British industry to stagnate and industrial output actually declined in absolute terms during the inter-war period. By 1939, both Germany and USSR had larger shares of world trade than United Kingdom, who was increasingly acting its size.

World War I also brought with it a surge in colonial nationalism, demanding significant retraction of the mother country's jurisdiction. Through a series of policy changes, the inter-war period increasingly turned the Empire into a Commonwealth, built on consent rather than hegemony.

The third phase, 1941–1960, is the period when Britain plunges from the top to a second-tier position.²⁷ Here, the real culprit is once again the war. 1941

²⁶ All these years should of course be taken as approximations. These processes are not contained in single events, but I have chosen dates that marks event that represents at least some major shift.

²⁷ As I argue repeatedly in this thesis, the exact date of the 'death' of the British Empire is of lesser importance after 1945, when its fate was more or less sealed. In this case I chose 1960, the year of decolonialisation.

was a year of immense symbolic importance, both in that Britain signed the Atlantic Charter, which was explicitly non-imperialistic in its character, and in the loss of the Kingdom of Sarawak to the Japanese.²⁸ Also economically, the Second World War hit significantly harder than the first and when Britain entered into post-war negotiations, she did so almost as an economic protectorate of the States. Any (truly) imperial ambitions were at this point completely out of touch with the situation and simply irrational. Britain's attempts to maintain an important global position were then squandered repeatedly in 1949, when she had to compromise her elevated status to keep India in the Commonwealth;²⁹ in 1956, when her inability to command international affairs became apparent; and in 1960, when she was finally stripped of most of her colonies. This thesis ends with 1949, both as a result of the necessity of limitations on any study, and because of the symbolic power imbedded in the fact that the changes of 1949 stems from British initiative. In this sense this dissertation begins with the material of study—the birth of a popular federalism in Britain—and ends in context—with an act that revealed the compromises that British self-understanding had needed to endure.

The reason for this exposition is to show how the deterioration of Britain's imperial conditions was of distinctly different characters at different points in time. Correspondingly, British federalism adapted differently to different situations—seeming to change drastically when its driving force in reality was constant.

Method, Material & Application of Context

The reason for the outline above becomes clear only when it is employed methodologically as an explanatory tool for understanding when and in what form British federalism emerges. As such, it is part of my general methodological approach.

Meaning & Explanation

For my understanding of method in a broad sense, I am heavily indebted to Mark Bevir and his stressing on explaining ideas rather than to extract what

²⁸ In spite of its geographical insignificance, the example of the Kingdom of Sarawak played an immensely important role in Britain's post-war colonial politics. Britain's cold-hearted rationality in defending the colony—carrying out a 'scorched earth'-strategy when the Japanese invasion became inevitable—in combination with her complete inability to actually do so—the 125,000 m² colony was left with only one Indian regiment to defend it—culminated in an embarrassing shortcoming in stark contrast with her imperialist ambitions. To colonies contemplating independence, the British treatment of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Sarawak became a brutal example of the true extent of British loyalty.

²⁹ Renaming it the Commonwealth of Nations, dropping any reference to Britain.

they mean. Bevir argues that it is misguided to think that the ideas of history are best derived from historical texts through interpreting their meaning. Rather, if one seeks to understand what ideas informed a certain text we need to turn to intentionalism. Instead of focusing on what a particular utterance meant at the time, Bevir suggests that the historian should turn his or her attention to why the particular utterance was uttered in the manner and when it was.³⁰

According to Bevir, the explanation for a certain text is primarily to be found within its author's 'web of beliefs': the beliefs held by the person at the time of writing, held together in a (at least apparently) consistent structure through common themes. These webs are the intellectual historian's object of study. For explaining changes to a certain setup of beliefs, Bevir turns to 'semantic holism' in arguing that changes to a person's beliefs cannot be derived to solely his or her experiences nor rationality, but rather to the interplay of the two.³¹ Change to a certain person's web of beliefs is brought by a dilemma: 'new belief which merely by virtue of the fact that one accepts it as true poses a question of one's existing beliefs.'³² That is, a dilemma does not connect to any of one's already established themes. Thus, incorporation of the newly accepted belief requires a rearranging which can cause ripple effects in seemingly disconnected parts of one's worldview. Diachronic change in a person's held beliefs are studied through the texts they produce, discerning how dilemmas are incorporated as they emerge.³³

I argue that the deterioration of Britain's imperial conditions is a constant source of dilemmas that are presented to British federalists through the period of study. With every significant alteration to Britain's imperial prospects, corresponding alterations must be done to the federalists' webs of beliefs. Thus, I use this context as a reoccurring methodological tool to study the changes within the British federalist ideology caused by the series of dilemmas it was exposed to by the deterioration of the British imperial conditions.

Here, an important question arises: How can the course of events outlined above constitute a series of dilemmas to the federalist ideology if the federalists themselves were not aware of all of the events in question? By the definition above, beliefs could be relevant as dilemmas only to the extent that the person in question is holding the beliefs him/herself. However, I would argue that the outlined deterioration is not relevant only to the extent that British federalists were aware of its details, but rather to the extent that its cumulative effects were noticeable in the period. Every change was certainly not of equal relevance, but the changes here presented surmounted to larger processes—represented in the

³⁰ MARK BEVIR, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999) pp. 31-77.

³¹ MARK BEVIR, 'The Role of Context in Understanding and Explanation', in Hans Erich Bödeker (ed.), *Begriffsgeschichte, Diskursgeschichte, Metapherngeschichte*, Göttinger Gespräche Zur Geschichtswissenschaft; Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag (2002) pp. 196-202.

³² BEVIR, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* p. 228.

³³ BEVIR, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* pp. 228-33.

three phases—that were acknowledged by their contemporaries and influenced the terms of both critique of and praise for the Empire. A more nuanced picture of the relevance of different aspects of the imperial condition’s deterioration will of course be applied in the analytical chapters themselves.

Without dwelling on Bevir more than necessary, a short note on the utility of historical meaning is needed. It is, of course, essential to understand the meaning of an utterance in order to trace the ideas that formed it. What Bevir does is stressing two crucial points when it come to the utility of meaning. Firstly, when studying the ideas of individuals as they emerge, meaning is not an end in itself but a means to understand the text. Secondly, when studying the meaning of a particular utterance there is no ‘logic of discovery’ that always gives the answer; no method is generically suitable. Instead, Bevir argues for the use of ‘heuristic maxims’ as tools ‘to draw the attention of historians to sources of evidence and fruitful ways of thinking about the past.’³⁴ Following segments will account for the most rewarding heuristic maxims used in this study.

My Heuristic Maxims

The most important heuristic of the study is, as I have touched upon numerous times, contextualisation. This is of course meant as contextualisation as general tool to understand history, but also in the sense of the more specific contextualisation of imperial deterioration. Apart from presenting British federalism with continuous dilemmas, I would also argue that the federalist message of any given period must be understood in the light of the contemporary imperial status of Britain. The federalist visions of any given time was closely linked to the perceived threats to one’s imperial status and Britain’s political power, of course manifested in its imperial success. As such, I employ this context not only to explain but also to understand the federalist ideas.

Another important function of this contextualisation—and another of its heuristic uses—is its function as a narrative for the study at hand. To structure this rather long period of study I will employ the three phases that I have presented in order to lend the whole study direction and purpose. Using the word ‘narrative’ is in this case not indicative of a concession to a relativist position—narrative as the sense-making within nonreferential language—but a concession to the fact that there is no straightforward way to reach *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. Instead, I apply narrative as an argumentative way of making sense of an overwhelmingly multifaceted historical process, suggesting a connection between a certain series of events: not only to show that any given event occurs after another, but because of another.³⁵ The employment of a narrative allows

³⁴ BEVIR, ‘The Role of Context’, p. 177.

³⁵ ROBERT F. BERKHOFER, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse*; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1995) p. 37.

me to argue for the beginning and end of a process of meaningful and significant impact, even if to define either its ‘real’ beginning, end or causality would be impossible. The intention ‘is not to integrate all events ... but rather to link them together in a chain of provisional and restricted characterizations of finite provinces of manifestly “significant” occurrence.’³⁶

In discerning meaning I am also indebted to Quentin Skinner’s concept of intended illocutionary force. In his article ‘Motives, Intentions and the Interpretations of Texts’ Skinner argues—through language theorist J.L. Austin—that to understand the meaning of the text we must look beyond the immediate semantic meaning to what the author attempted to achieve with the text, its intended effect.³⁷ Keith Graham defines it as the intended behaviour the author aspires to inspire.³⁸ This notion is also important in explaining the text, as shown by Bevir’s appropriation of the concept in his ‘illocutionary viewpoint’: a belief of the author which is discernible through the texts intended illocutionary force.³⁹

Lastly, this study draws somewhat upon the insights generated from metaphor studies.⁴⁰ This theory is not limited to the kind of grand metaphors that may define a certain political discourse (e.g. ‘the cold war’), but also includes everyday patterns of speech such as ‘I’m on it’. To this study, the metaphorical logic of the Empire’s deterioration has been of interest: what images that were called upon—directly and indirectly—to make sense of what the federalists experienced. These metaphors are studied not only as a matter of recording what has been said, but as carriers of certain meaning. Henrik Björck argues that the metaphors say something about the inherent logic of the statement that may not be clear from the explicit text; it may be something the author was not aware of her-/himself or something that was so obvious at the time that it did not need mentioning.⁴¹ The metaphors can help give a statement a certain sense of direction.

³⁶ HAYDEN WHITE, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (1975) p. 19.

³⁷ QUENTIN SKINNER, ‘Motives, Intentions and the Interpretations of Texts’, in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and His Critics*; Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1988).

³⁸ KEITH GRAHAM, ‘How Do Illocutionary Descriptions Explain?’, in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*; Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1988) pp. 148-51.

³⁹ BEVIR, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* p. 135.

⁴⁰ See for example A. ORTONY, *Metaphor and Thought*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1979), GEORG LAKOFF & MARK JOHNSON, *Metaphors We Live By*; Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1980) and LEO MARX, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*; Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000).

⁴¹ HENRIK BJÖRCK, *Teknisk Idéhistoria*, ed. Bo Lindberg, Arachne; Göteborg: Tidsskriftverkstaden (1995) pp. 55-57.

Material

Without being able to draw any clear distinction, the material of this study can be said to be distributed in two categories—related to each other as two sets in a Venn diagram. While all material is related to federalist ideas, certain material connected to organisations and individuals respectively lacks relevance in explaining the other set. But while many texts are relevant to only one of these sets, the general principle that have guided my collection of the material has been one and the same. The rare exception will, of course, be acknowledged.

The studies of the organisations are to a large extent based on published and official material. In some cases closed meetings and letter exchanges have been needed in order to understand movements ‘behind the scenes’, but in the majority of cases I have sought material where the organisation attempts to present its official views. For example, the organisations’ own newsletter and journals have been given a lot of weight when portraying the position of a certain organisation. The quarterly *The Round Table*, the monthly *New Commonwealth* and the weekly *Federal Union News* allowed both the spreading of the leadership’s views, the voice of the members to be heard and the organisation as a whole to react to contemporary events. As such, these publications have been treated as pivotal to their respective organisation ideologies and the relevant chapters have to some extent been structured around their content.

For the top-down perspective, the organisations’ official publications have been employed for a uniform view of the leadership’s intent. Among these publications are statements of aims as presented in the statutes, pamphlets and leaflets, published books and—when available—public lectures hosted in the organisation’s name.⁴² In the case of IMPERIAL FEDERATION LEAGUE there is also a proposed bill and Federal Union’s research institute produced two reports during the period.⁴³ These kinds of documents are deemed as particularly essential within the more centralised organisations—British Empire League, the Round Table & New Commonwealth Society—while presented in contestation with opposing views when studying the broader churches of Imperial Federation League and Federal Union. This difference is most apparent in the treatment of the newspaper and journal articles of individual members.

For the British Empire League, Round Table and New Commonwealth Society the articles of individual members have been utilised mainly either to explain or to nuance the organisation’s official position. In these centralised organisations there was a somewhat uniform view throughout the organisation, and individual articles are studied either when developing the official position

⁴² See for example PATRICK RANSOME, *Studies in Federal Planning*; London: Lothian Foundation (1990).

⁴³ See PATRICK RANSOME & FEDERAL UNION RESEARCH INSTITUTE, *Towards the United States of Europe : Studies on the Making of the European Constitution*; London; New York: Lothian Foundation Press (1991).

further or when exemplifying an influential exception. For Imperial Federation League and Federal Union there was not the same consensus within the member base, and as a result the individual articles are important to understand the great variance within the organisations. The most prominent example is Imperial Federation League, which through its existence was continuously troubled with the lack of any form of consensus and extreme discrepancies between individual members' articles and the official organisation position.⁴⁴ Within the Federal Union this tendency is not as accentuated since most of the controversy is played out in *Federal Union News*. There are, however, some important examples of important figures diverging from the rest of the leadership.⁴⁵

Lastly, nonofficial material such as non-public or informal meetings and private letters have mostly been employed as an aid to understand the public ideas. Since the organisations are studied as representations of the federalist movement as a whole it is important the study does not get excessively dependant on material completely unknown to federalists of the time. The nonofficial material has at times proved valuable for particularly detailed tracings of the webs of beliefs that informed certain federalist ideas but, apart from elucidation, it has not been used to understand those ideas in themselves.

In understanding the individual federalists, priority has been given to their published material: mainly books and articles. While these should not be expected to give the complete picture they are carefully and thoroughly put together expressions of the ideas most valued by their authors. As an example, *The Problem of the Commonwealth* is not only an attempt by Curtis to succinctly and seriously put forward his ideas, but the effort put into the book's production reflects the importance of the ideas brought forth to the author.⁴⁶ As such, the published ideas have been given priority when structuring the studies of the individual federalists, even the differences in output between them requires some difference in treatment.

The most straightforward to study are the federalists with a relatively medium output: Wootton, Ransome, Freeman, Balfour and Forster. Their manageable corpora allows the study to cover their writings in a representative way, with the published material dictating the mayor themes of the analysis. For the most prolific writers—Curtis, Kerr and Laski—quite radical restrictions have had to be made. As such, the most predominant themes has been brought forward and studied, rather than attempting to present all of their contributions to the federalist tradition in a representative manner. Rather, their largest influential themes are studied closely. The last group of federalists, Milner and Davies, stand out in their very limited writings: both naturally fit for organisational and

⁴⁴ See for example EDWARD A. FREEMAN, 'Prospects of Home Rule', *Fortnightly Review*, 46 (1886) and WILLIAM EDWARD FORSTER, 'A Few More Words on Imperial Federation', in *The Pamphlet Collection of Sir Robert Stout* (ed.), (57; Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington Library, 1885).

⁴⁵ See for example

⁴⁶ LIONEL CURTIS, *The Problem of the Commonwealth*; Melbourne., (1916).

administrative issues rather than acting in the public debate. The limited published material they left behind is complemented with both official material (speeches, debates in parliament etc.) and unofficial (mainly letters) to give a fuller picture.

Also the ideas of the more productive writers have been complemented with other official material, albeit more as an effort to nuance and elucidate than to map out the ideas. Several of these federalists were quite active in parliament and all of the organisations made a point of frequent public meetings, where many of the individual federalists studied contributed as influential members. Even if this material does not represent the ideas as fully or as structured as the written material, it says something important about the expectations federalists had on the society's reception of their ideas. It is a vital material to understand the federalists' positioning within the public debate and linguistic context of the time.

Similarly, letters, diary notes etc. has been needed to different extents depending on the amount of literary productivity of the individual. In the more prolific cases unofficial material has been employed primarily to nuance the officially presented ideas, to study particularly sensitive or controversial aspects of the author's ideology or to study the immediate reactions to significant events. For less prolific writers, this material has been used to explore the ideas more generally as well, particularly in the cases such as Milner, whose political position prevented him to air certain opinions. For those federalists who had access to certain political circles (such as Kerr and Milner relationships to David Lloyd George), letters and notes also allows us to study the less popular political action proposed behind closed doors.

Previous Research

'The conventional wisdom is that federalist ideas in Great Britain have always fallen on stony soil.'¹⁷ British Federalism was for a long time considered an anomaly within the British political tradition. Thus, many scholars have felt compelled to prove its relevance and innovation, resulting in research more concerned with mapping out and bringing into light than explaining and problematizing. Federalist scholars have also tended to centre their studies on the description of the ideas, whereas I would argue that thorough contextualisation is needed in order to understand both the meaning of and the reason for a certain statement. Hence, the decline of the British Empire is in previous research only mentioned in passing, and only sporadically utilised as a significant

¹⁷ RICHARD SIMEON, 'The British Tradition of Federalism by Michael Burgess', *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 26/3 (1996), p. 206.

context. Lastly, there are only two previous examples of studies covering a period that stretches over the lifespan of several of the federalist organisations, attempting to understand the tradition itself rather than any particular organisation or individual.

Hence, the overlook of previous research has been divided in two sections, the first one covering the two overarching federalist studies, and the second covering the studies done on limited aspects of the tradition. The last section is divided by organisation, since it is representative of the field at large, even if it is not a partition that is employed here.

Research on the Tradition of British Federalism

Prior to this study, there are two books giving an overarching understanding of British federalism, rather than focusing on one particular organisation or period: Michael Burgess' *The British Tradition of Federalism* (1995) and John Kendle's *Federal Britain: a History* (1997).⁴⁸ Their remarkable proximity in time is indicative of something resembling a peak in historical federalist research in Britain during the nineties.⁴⁹ Since then, these two books have acted as gatekeepers to the field and their comprehensive takes are simply impossible to ignore of later scholars.

While stemming from the same time, the books have some distinct differences. Kendle's approach is very idea-focused, tracing an analytical understanding of the idea of federalism as it evolves from the early 1800s and through the twentieth century. While Kendle has made an impressive effort in mapping out such an extensive period of federalist activity, he has been forced to compromise with contextualisation. In this regard, his and my approach differs significantly, as I would argue that it is through contextualisation that the ideas become intelligible to the historian. At times, Kendle refers to the context of imperial dissolution, but only as this context is mentioned in the source material, resulting in an analysis that leans too heavily on the historical actors' understanding of themselves.

Rather than context, Kendle argues that it is the continued betterment of the federalist idea that drives its history, improvements brought on by the addition of new minds to the movement. In this sense, *Federal Britain* is a history of the slow building of an idea, from its rough and unpolished beginnings towards perfection.

Burgess does not share this progressive view of British federalism, and as his book is outlined by theme rather than by period, he even refrains from any

⁴⁸ BURGESS, *The British Tradition of Federalism* and JOHN KENDLE, *Federal Britain: A History*; London: Routledge (1997).

⁴⁹ If it ever was fashionable to write on supranational questions in the UK it was during the 90s. EU was moving its positions forward, Britain seemed to be settling into its membership and the question of devolution was widely debated. All this put together, it is not surprising that two scholars came up with the idea of studying Britain's past supranational ideas independently of each other.

larger synchronic narrative. His partition in three themes (Empire, Ireland & Europe) allows him to treat Britain's federalist tradition (which is his concept), not primarily as an intellectual entity, but rather as a loosely connected *tradition*, drawn upon to tackle a wide range of issues.

Even if Burgess' approach is not as free from contextualisation as Kendle's, context is not what is driving the analysis either. Particularly the context of Imperial dissolution is, similarly to in Kendle, touched upon but not systematically, and in a rapidly declining frequency after World War I.

In sum, neither Kendle nor Burgess completely overlook the deterioration of Britain's imperial conditions, but my systematic employment of that perspective leads my study down a different path in two significant ways. Firstly, I would argue that this is not one of many significant contexts, but rather the one dominant (even if not exclusive) explanatory factor in understanding both what the federalist idea entailed and why it emerged when it did. Secondly, I would argue that this context maintains its importance throughout the period I study. To Kendle and Burgess, the imperial context is obvious regarding the Imperial Federation League, but already for the Round Table it has become more of an inconvenience than anything else, and basically something completely irrelevant to the Federal Union. This widespread notion, I would argue, stems from the underestimation of the changing nature of the Empire's dissolution.

Research on the Imperial Federation League

The research on the Imperial Federation League has been the most focused on imperial decline, simply because it is such an explicit part of their ideology. However, the employment of the imperial context is most often restricted to explaining the sudden popularity of the idea (which constituted the organisation's member base), and only seldom extended to explaining the content of the federalist ideas themselves.

In *Federal Britain*, Kendle has devoted a chapter to the study of the ideas and the members of the Imperial Federation League. He is particularly interested in what contributions that can be traced from them to British federalism of the twentieth century. His focus on the ideas themselves reduces his employment of context to basically explaining direct references to contemporary events. He touches, for example, upon the gradual independence of Canada and Australia from the 1860s and forward, but only as it is mentioned in the source material—and never with the intent of contextually explaining why the federalist ideas originated then and in the manner they did.⁵⁰

For a more thorough contextualisation of the League, one may consider not Burgess' book from 1995, but rather his thesis from 1967. In it, he explores

⁵⁰ KENDLE, *Federal Britain: A History* pp. 46-57. The same focus can be seen in JOHN KENDLE, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences 1887-1911: A Study in Imperial Organization*, Imperial Studies,; London, (1967).

how factors such as the changing relationship with the colonies, the worsening of imperial economics, parliament's indifference towards constitutional questions, etc. all paved the way for the birth of an imperial federation movement.⁵¹ Even if he himself is reluctant to frame these factors in terms of imperial decline, it is clear that he perceives the changing conditions which the British Empire suddenly faced as fundamental to understand the birth of the League and its ideas. He, however, treats these challenges to traditional imperial practice as separate phenomena—never studying them under the umbrella of 'imperial decline'—and thus neglecting the contextual continuity into the twentieth century that this study is centred on.

Research on the Round Table

The Round Table, also advocates of Imperial Federation, has often been studied in relationship with imperial affairs in a similar manner as the League. These readings have, however, focused on the rise of dominion nationalism and the changing nature of international relationships globally, rather than the actual economic and political decline of the United Kingdom. Additionally, these contextual remarks have most often, once again, been used as an explanation for the success of the organisation's ideas rather than as explanatory for the shaping of the ideas themselves.

Historian Alexander May's article 'The Round Table and Imperial Federation, 1910-17' is a fitting example of this position. May treats the rise of Dominion nationalism with great care but presents it as the only imperial process relevant to the Round Table members. The rising power of USA is completely omitted from his account and Germany is only mentioned as a military threat, not a geopolitical one. As such, the Empire's changing conditions are presented as limited to its internal disintegration (essentially brought about from the success of the civilising mission) and its external moral responsibilities against a 'militaristic and expansionist' Germany; an image very similar to how the Round Table would like to present themselves.⁵² This treatment downplays the absolute and relative decline that the Empire experienced at the time, and is thus, I would argue, unable to study the Round Table ideas as an attempt to defend Britain's global position.

May's Ph.D. thesis—*The Round Table, 1910-60*—employs a more in-depth approach to the relationship between imperial decline and the Table's ideas, covering the matter quite extensively. However, May's approach differs

⁵¹ MICHAEL BURGESS, 'The Imperial Federation Movement in Great Britain, 1869-1893', Ph.D. thesis (University of Leicester, 1976) pp. 15-46.

⁵² ALEXANDER MAY, 'The Round Table and Imperial Federation, 1910-17', *Round Table*, 99/410 (2010), p. 550. Of course May's article is a case of the Round Table actually presenting itself, but this tendency is not uncommon in the field at large. It should also be added that to the extent May's article is guilty of too much buying into the Round Table's own self-understanding regarding the contextualisation, that is not the case of the article generally.

distinctly from mine in that he treats imperial decline as an obstacle to overcome. He argues that we must understand the Round Table as a rational and realistic endeavour, even in the face of the obvious decline.⁵³ My approach is the exact opposite, in that I argue that there would be no need for imperial federation if there were no imperial decline. The organisation is driven by the desire to maintain Britain's global position, and is thus forced to act, not in spite of, but because of the decline of the Empire.

Kendle admits minor explanatory power to the changes in the relationship between the mother country and her Dominions and dependencies (and even touches upon Britain's global position at large), but beyond a short mention in his *Federal Britain* the focus in his writings is maintained on the federal idea. As such, his focus is on how the individuals of the Table were able to concretise the idea beyond of what the League had left behind.⁵⁴

Burgess shares Kendle's idea-focused approach to the organisation, while recognising the immediate relevance of imperial decline to its members. He argues that the federalists were aware that 'both extra-imperial and intra-imperial relationships were rapidly changing' and that they were driven by the 'belief in the urgent need to do something about the empire before it finally and irretrievably fell apart'.⁵⁵ These factors are however mentioned only in passing and are never made part of the analysis.

Additionally, there are biographies written on the two most influential members of the Table, Lionel Curtis and Philip Kerr. Historian Deborah Lavin's *From Empire to International Commonwealth: A Biography of Lionel Curtis* is primarily actor-centred, focusing on the actions of Curtis and the people closest to him, but still includes all of the major events of his lifetime (South Africa's independence, the two wars, the Irish Treaty, several EU treaties, etc.). More over-arching processes, such as imperial decline, are covered through these significant events, but the search for a post-imperial role is never interpreted as something on the lines of a reoccurring motivation. There are, however, moments where Lavin seems to suggest that the search for such a role was a relevant consideration: 'Curtis ... assumed that Britain would play a leading role in the post-war world'.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, these instances are few and far between and are never structured into a larger narrative.

⁵³ ALEXANDER MAY, 'The Round Table, 1910-66', DPhil thesis (Oxford University, UK, 1995) pp. 35-39

⁵⁴ KENDLE, *Federal Britain: A History* pp. 79-104, JOHN KENDLE, 'The Round Table Movement, New Zealand and the Conference of 1911', *The Round Table*, 84/336 (October 1995) and JOHN KENDLE, 'The Round Table Movement and "Home Rule All Around"', *Historical Journal*, 11/2 (June 1968).

⁵⁵ BURGESS, *The British Tradition of Federalism* p. 77 & 73.

⁵⁶ DEBORAH LAVIN, *From Empire to International Commonwealth: A Biography of Lionel Curtis*, *From Empire to International Commonwealth: A Biography of Lionel Curtis*; (2011) p. 298. Similarly, see DEBORAH LAVIN, 'Lionel Curtis and Indian Dyarchy', in Andrea Bosco (ed.), *The Federal Idea: The History of Federalism from the Enlightenment to 1945*, 1; London: Lothian Foundation Press (1991).

Historian James Butler's *Lord Lothian (Philip Kerr) 1882-1940* shares very similar characteristics to *From Empire to International Commonwealth*. While being slightly more skewed to Kerr's immediate and personal context, it is also a thorough study of a man's career and the contexts that shaped his choices. Some of these contexts are significant events in the canon of decolonialisation, but they are never interpreted as indicative of a larger personal process.⁵⁷

It should be added that my study also contributes with research on the Round Table beyond the end of the 1910s. With one exception, previous research has decided either to end their study by the end of World War I and the Irish Treaty or to continue by shifting the perspective to exclusively studying the ideas of Curtis and Kerr. May's thesis stands out as the singular attempt to cover Round Table activity throughout the inter-war period and beyond the Second World War. My thesis will not cover this period of Round Table activity in any exhaustive manner, but it makes a humble, albeit important contribution to the study of the inter-war Round Table.

Research on Federal Union

The research on Federal Union has been almost completely devoid of references to Britain's at the time quickly deteriorating global influence. The general narrative has been that Federal Union marks a clean break with the tradition of Imperial Federalism, thus rendering the context of imperial decline irrelevant to the organisation's ideas. Without the overarching contextualisation of imperial decline, the continuation between Federal Union and its two predecessors has not been visible apart from a couple shared members and the very general concept of a federalist framework.

For some, the neglect of the imperial context is the result of a history focusing on the development of a certain idea, rather than its context. Historian Andrea Bosco was crucial in championing a perspective on the organisation emphasising its importance as an influence to Altiero Spinelli in his theorisation of the European Project. In articles such as 'Lothian, Curtis, Kimber and the Federal Union Movement (1938-40)', Federal Union is treated as the growing ground for the supranational principles that Philip Kerr had distilled out of the Imperial Federalism that a failing Round Table clung on to.⁵⁸ To Bosco, it is the fact that they had rid the organisation of the imperial content that allowed

⁵⁷ J. R. M. BUTLER, *Lord Lothian (Philip Kerr) 1882-1940*, London: Macmillan (1960). Interestingly enough, both Lavin and Butler omit reference to the Balfour Declaration of 1924, again confirming the reluctance of writing a story of decolonialisation.

⁵⁸ ANDREA BOSCO, 'Lothian, Curtis, Kimber and the Federal Union Movement (1938-40)', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23/3 (1988). On the same lines of proving the influence of Federal Union ideas, see ANDREA BOSCO, 'Federal Union, Chatham House, the Foreign Office and Anglo-French Union in Spring 1940', in Andrea Bosco (ed.), *The Federal Idea: The History of Federalism from Enlightenment to 1945*, 1; London: Lothian Foundation Press (1991).

them to pioneer federalist ideas still relevant today. Bosco's article is also one of the best examples of British federalist history's tendency to map out and bring forward rather than problematize. As such, many of the nuances and variations within the organisation is ignored in order to be able to present a streamlined pro-European message from British federalists already at the beginning of World War II.

Both Kendle and Burgess refer exclusively to the context of the Second World War and the preceding failing of the League of Nations in their studies of the organisation.⁵⁹ The relationships to the European Project is studied to the extent that their studies goes beyond 1945, but both seems to completely dismiss the relevance of imperial affairs. Kendle includes a chapter on 'Federalism and Decolonialization', but he treats it as a separate off-shoot from mainstream federalism and never ties it to Federal Union and its ideas.⁶⁰

The most detailed and nuanced enquiry into any of the three organisations can be found in John Pinder's and Richard Mayne's *Federal Union: the Pioneers*. With its almost 300 pages, Pinder and Mayne are allowed to study Federal Union's ideas and its origins more closely, and through focusing on the failure of the League of Nations, The Second World War and the European Project they give an impressively detailed account for how the organisation's activity parallels these important processes.⁶¹ What is completely omitted, however, is once again the decolonialisation of the British Empire. Neither India's independence, the London Declaration nor the Suez Crisis are mentioned, presumably since the 'loosing of a role' is not deemed relevant to the organisation's motivations.

While the historiography of the different periods all have their distinct characteristics, some reoccurring themes are clear, even if the reasoning behind them may vary. This study follows from a field of research that has tended to produce detailed and extensive studies of ideas and their history. Sometimes the contexts of these ideas are completely neglected, but most often there has been a focus on what context governed the ideas' popularity, rather than on what actually shaped them. When the latter form of context has been studied, imperial affairs have most often been neglected to the benefit of the World Wars, the Irish question, the European Project etc. Finally, those studies that have made reference to the contemporary imperial decline has either treated it as an obstacle or refrained from doing so in a systematic manner. This thesis

⁵⁹ KENDLE, *Federal Britain: A History* pp. 105-22 and BURGESS, *The British Tradition of Federalism* pp. 139-48. This assumption is commonplace in research on issues tangent to Federal Union as well, but when the organisation is not at the core of the study this lack of nuance is not as much of an issue. See for example OR ROSENBOIM, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939-1950*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2017).

⁶⁰ KENDLE, *Federal Britain: A History* pp. 123-49

⁶¹ See MAYNE & PINDER, *Federal Union: The Pioneers: A History of Federal Union* pp. 17-33, 50-55, 80-108, 18-27, 75-202.

attempts to fill this void by systematically studying the relationship between British Federalism and the dissolution of the British Empire in order to show the continuity in motivation despite the discontinuity in ideas. In order to concretise this description further, the next section gives an outline of the study at hand.

Outline

After this introductory chapter follows ‘Empire Immortalised, 1884-1893’. The periodization reflects the rather short-lived activity of the Imperial Federation League as it fights for the federalisation of the Empire. As the British economic trajectory turned downwards, the organisation attempted to incorporate economic strains and the ‘maturation’ of the Empire—several Canadian colonies had recently been granted self-governance—in a constitution that could outlive the eventual independence of all of the Queen’s dominions. Even if many Imperial Federation League members were informed about the shift in imperial conditions, the organisation struggled against public ignorance on the situation.

As an organisation structured rather loosely, there were some individuals that exerted considerable influence on both its program and discourse. Probably the most driving force within the organisation was William Edward Forster, whose original and ambitious ideas on federation became fundamental to the organisation. Another very interesting federalist of the time, and influential in a completely different manner, was Edward Freeman. His ideas were not in line with the rest of the organisation, but as a relentless debater his views came to shape a significant part of Imperial Federation League discourse, forcing the leaders to strengthen their arguments before entering the public debate.

The third chapter, ‘Federalism regrouping, 1894-1909’, studies British federalism in something akin to a dormant period. While there are active federalists carrying the federalist torch across the turn of the century, federalism did not enjoy the popularity to support a comprehensively federalist organisation. Rather, the study focuses on Balfour and his participation in the newly founded British Empire League, an offshoot of the Imperial Federation League that did not defend its precursor’s federalist message whole-heartedly, but still argued for the importance of closer imperial cooperation. By the turn of the century, federalist unity was shattered in Britain and British Empire League represents one of many factions.

Another crucial influence during the period was Alfred Milner and his developed notion of the civilising mission of the English race. While his influence, as well as his federalist conviction, was not particularly pronounced during the period, his influence on the Kindergarten surrounding him led to his long-term influence on British federalism to become almost unmatched. As

such, while this is a period of significant challenges to the British Empire in, for example, the Boer War and Germany's rising power, federalism made it through more or less on the back burner. That said, notwithstanding the lack in federalist innovation and dynamism, the period is crucial in determining the tradition's course in the beginning of the 20th century.

The fourth chapter, 'The Empire at War, 1910-1919', is focused on the early years of the Round Table. Its foundation in 1910 meant an invigoration of the federalist tradition which through a central organisation regained its sense of direction. Based on their shared experience, the Milner's Kindergarten initially stood for a federalism with a very similar content to that of the Imperial Federation League, but its impetus was pragmatic conservatism rather than nostalgia. The period ends with the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, reflecting the immeasurable effect the Great War would have on the Round Table but, more importantly, on the British society at large.

In an attempt to stay true to history rather than an appealing outline, both chapter four and chapter five are represented by the same two key federalists: Lionel Curtis and Philip Kerr. This is both a reflection on the unparalleled influence these two individuals exercised on the British federalist tradition as a whole and on the fact that federalist innovation in Britain during the 10s and 20s most prominently stemmed from the dynamic between them. During this period, Curtis presents his momentous vision of an 'Organic Union' as the next step for the British Empire and Kerr develops his theory on the causes of World War I.

The fifth chapter, 'The Prevention of War, 1920-1931' covers a period when the independence of the British Dominions was strengthened significantly, most prominently through the Balfour Declaration (1924) and the Statute of Westminster (1931). It is, naturally, a period of interwar reflection where the federalists' initial reactions to the Great War found time to mature and develop. Lastly, it is the period when Britain's diminishing global position becomes apparent internationally.

As in the previous chapter, Curtis, Kerr and the Round Table are studied as representatives of the federalist matrix; their internal dynamic, however, shifts quite drastically. In the 1910s, Kerr and Curtis agreed with each other and with the organisation on all the major federalist principles, and differed only in emphasis on certain issues. During this period, these emphases develop into ideological impetuses that drives Kerr and Curtis on different paths, leaving the Round Table behind. While the Round Table becomes more and more concerned with the notion of Commonwealth and less and less relevant to the federalist tradition, Kerr develops his critique of the nation-state into a global federalist vision and Curtis' notion of organic union is refined into a set of governing principles.

The sixth chapter, 'Federalism and the Nation, 1932-1938', covers the period when British federalism is probably the hardest to define. As the previous chapter suggests, the tradition becomes increasingly fragmented during the inter-war period, with the 1930s representing the culmination. In order to capture this diversity the thesis will focus on David Davies and the New Commonwealth Society, which he founded in 1932. New Commonwealth Society represented a less radical, more 'Commonwealthesque' approach to federalism which gained a lot of traction also in the Round Table. Additionally, I will study Political Scientist Harold Laski, who from made important contributions to the federalist idea through his critique of the Nation-State.

In a period when Britain's imperial muscles seemed diminishing with its declining global power, albeit increasingly important to counteract the rise of Hitler, Davies and Laski represents two drastically different approaches to the same situation. They embodied an ideological fork in the road that would come to shape British federalism for the foreseeable future.

The seventh chapter, 'Peace at all Cost, 1938-1949', studies the organisation Federal Union and concludes the analytical chapters of the thesis. Federal Union was founded in 1938 and within years they enjoyed incredible popularity with their global federalist message. Distinctly avoiding imperial connotations, the organisation argued for the Nation-State as the continuous cause for war and consequently world federation as the road to peace. One of the organisation's founders, Patrick Ransome, is studied in more detail as he was one of the most important ideologists. The other is Barbara Wootton, one of the organisation's most prominent members, and an ardent socialist fighting for world socialism as a precursor of the revolution.

The concluding and eighth chapter does summarise the findings and indicate further research possibilities. Additionally, the search for Britain's post-imperial role will be viewed from a contemporary perspective: looking at what the struggles of Britain's early federalists may tell us about Britain's current struggles and her future role in the world.

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