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Review by Mathias Haeussler, Magdalene College, University of Cambridge

In December 1962, the former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson quipped in a speech at West Point that Britain had “lost an Empire” and “not yet found a role.” It is only one of many examples where British attitudes towards post-war Europe have been explicitly linked to the country’s imperial history and loss of global power status after the Second World War. Yet, surprisingly few historical studies investigate the actual impact of Britain’s imperial past on the country’s evolving attitudes in the European integration. Lindsay Aqui’s important and well-researched article thus adds some much-needed empirical substance to such bigger debates over Britain’s post-war international role. Based largely on declassified prime ministerial files from the British National Archives, it explores the role of Ghana in Britain’s first application to join the European Communities (EC) in 1961-1963—a time period which, of course, coincides with Acheson’s now famous speech.

When the British government under Prime Minister Harold Macmillan—who confined to his diary at the time that he had always regarded Acheson as “a conceited ass”—publicly announced its decision to apply for EC membership in July 1961, the move was quickly and widely interpreted as a move away from the country’s imperial past and its Commonwealth links. The public debate at the time, however, centred primarily on the ‘old’ Commonwealth of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, a tendency that has since been

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reflected in much historical writing on the first application. Aqui shows that the so-called ‘new’ Commonwealth also had an important part to play, and that it contributed significantly to the British government’s re-evaluation of its approach in 1962 (586).

Ghana was a particularly important country for the British, having emerged as one of the strongest anti-colonial forces soon after its independence in 1957. Yet, President Kwame Nkrumah was not only a vocal advocate of stronger pan-African links, but he also turned out to be one of the most outspoken opponents of British EC membership. Nkrumah’s opposition centred primarily on the allegedly “neo-colonial and discriminatory nature” (579) of the EC’s proposed accession agreements with Commonwealth countries, claiming that the proposed future relationship was exploitative and would ‘stifle’ Ghana’s future economic development. As Aqui shows, Nkrumah’s views here must be understood as part of his wider conviction that a divided Africa would eventually be again “reduced to a state of neo-colonial dependence on the European powers” (579). This was primarily a political argument about self-determination: Aqui suggests that Ghana’s deteriorating fiscal and economic situation at the time might well have benefited from closer association with EC, particularly as regards cocoa exports (580).

The British government was not pleased by Nkrumah’s uncompromising stance. Macmillan in particular had anticipated the by far strongest opposition to come from the ‘old’ Commonwealth—suddenly, he had to take into account the concerns of ‘new’ Commonwealth countries as well. It did not come lightly to the Edwardian-style Prime Minister, whose own post-imperial mindset clearly clouded his perceptions of Nkrumah’s position (581). Indeed, the British government soon made clear where its priorities lay: whereas Canberra, Ottawa and Wellington were graced with a visit by Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys prior to the official announcement of the application, the second-rank Minister of Labour John Hare had to suffice for African Commonwealth countries (581). Even after Nkrumah had made the extent of Ghana’s opposition clear at a strained Commonwealth Economic Consultative Council meeting in September 1961—in his memoirs, Macmillan talks condescendingly about Nkrumah’s “lack of complacence” (582)—the British position remained decidedly vague and noncommittal. The result was a rather tense Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference in London during September 1962, with underlying animosities only thinly disguised by the positive language in the final communiqué (584).

Like so many episodes in Britain’s post-war relationship with Europe, however, the issue was never fully resolved but ended prematurely. On 14 January 1963, French President Charles de Gaulle publicly declared his opposition to British EC membership in an astonishingly arrogant press conference. Britain was “linked through her exchanges, her markets, her supply lines to the most diverse and often the most distant countries”, he proclaimed, and Britain thus differed “profoundly” from “the continentals.” These claims might well be seen as a thinly-disguised rhetorical cover-up for French interest policies, but they nonetheless

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throw light on the prominence of the Commonwealth in Britain’s turn towards EC membership. Quite apart from economic and domestic considerations, as Aqui highlights, the ‘new’ Commonwealth also mattered in terms of the wider geostrategic Cold War context – “abandoning” Ghana, British ministers feared, might well drive Nkrumah into Soviet hands (584-6).

Fluently and authoritatively written, Aqui’s article constitutes an important contribution to the literature on Britain’s first EC application. Contemporary advocates of EC membership in 1960s Britain all-too-often claimed that the Commonwealth was a thing of the past, and that its importance to Britain was negligible. By contrast, Aqui shows convincingly that the Commonwealth posed very real problems in Britain’s pursuit of EC membership—not only to Britain, but also to the Commonwealth countries themselves. The article’s findings thus help us better appreciate the manifold complications and intricacies involved in Britain’s first EC application and beyond. This, of course, might also have bigger implications for how we interpret the application’s ultimate failure—was de Gaulle perhaps right after all?

Yet, the most significant aspect of Aqui’s article is the way in which it reveals how both Macmillan and Nkrumah tended to regard Britain’s EC and Commonwealth membership as two opposite and seemingly irreconcilable paths—a constructed dichotomy that has never completely evaporated in the British public discourse, as contemporary calls for a post-Brexit ‘global Britain’ show. But was this really the case? After all, as Aqui points out, the Belgian, Dutch, and French overseas territories had received rather beneficial trading arrangements with the EEC as Part IV of the Treaties of Rome (578), and we will never know whether Britain might not eventually have been able to achieve a similar feat. Whether this would then have accelerated or prevented the subsequent deterioration of British-Ghanaian relations during the 1960s is, of course, a different question.

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7 For the public debate over EC membership at the time, see M. Haeussler, ‘The Popular Press and Ideas of Europe: The Daily Mirror, the Daily Express, and Britain’s First Application to Join the EEC, 1961-63’, *Twentieth Century British History* 25/1 (March 2014), 108-131.