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**Proud to be Roman: Publishing the Classics in Early Twentieth Century Imperial Britain****Kerry Lewis****Abstract**

Much has already been written about Victorian appropriations of classical literature but there is very little written about the significance that the classics held for contemporary publishers transitioning into the twentieth-century. Moreover, whilst some have gone into depth exploring the relationship between the classics and British imperialism during the Edwardian years, no has of yet connected the chain of influence between publishers, educators and the British imperial government. Thus, this essay shall be exploring how and why the book industry published the classics in the context of contemporary British imperial policy.

**Key Words**

Publishing, Rome, Latin, Classics, Empire, Imperialism, Latin, Britain.

## Introduction

Since the first century A.D, when Britain itself was colonised by Rome, Latin and the classics have been a significant part of British elite culture and they continued to play a substantial role throughout the Victorian era and at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, Butler has stated that at the beginning of the Edwardian period allusions to Rome were numerous and appeared in multifarious forms as intellectuals repeatedly returned to ancient Rome to influence key debates (2012, 2). One of these key debates was British imperialism. This era was a time when 'New Imperialism' gripped the nation, causing aggressive expansionist policies that resulted in Britain's ability to claim sovereignty over a quarter of the world's population, and just under a quarter of the world's land (Plunkett, et al. 2012, 233). This essay shall therefore be exploring the ways in which this imperial background imbued contemporary classical scholarship with debates about the British Empire and vice versa. It shall argue that the Roman classics, and Latin, had come to represent a positive code of imperial discourse for publishers, focussing primarily upon Oxford University Press. This essay shall investigate the reasons why such publishers valued the classics in their lists and explore the classics as: an economic investment amongst schools and universities; a vehicle through which to discuss imperial politics; a necessity in order to enter British government; a way of legitimising British Imperialism; as well as promoting the identity of the elite.

**Essay**

The first reason why publishers disseminated the classics during this era was because they represented a very profitable and long-term investment due to contemporary schooling and university syllabuses. A number of historians have demonstrated the prevalence of the classics in the classroom, such as Ogilvie, who states that education in England “was for centuries dominated by the study of the classics”, with a particular emphasis on Latin (1974, 221). As a consequence, it would be expected for publishers to continue to publish works that had been perpetuated for centuries since. Indeed, into the late Victorian era this emphasis on the classical was still in effect and so publishers still had an eager and wealthy market to whom to sell, especially if, according to a Clarendon report, eleven of the twenty lessons given in public schools were on the classics (Goldhill 2011, 2). Thus, in schools, there was a clear demand for classical literature, and as a result, one could argue that the predominant reason why publishers disseminated the classics was because they sold. As Hurston rather cynically states, “[p]ublishing houses ... are in business to make money. They will sponsor anything that they believe will sell” (2010, 1024) and so an argument could be made that the classics were only valued by publishers because of the monetary gain they provided.

This is further emphasised by Bourdieu’s theories of the binaries between economic value and cultural value. He states that: “[a]n enterprise moves closer to the ‘commercial’

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pole the more directly or completely the products it offers on the market respond to a *pre-existing* demand, and in *pre-established forms*" (1996, 142). In light of this, it would appear as if publishing the classics truly was a commercial venture as not only was there a pre-existing demand, but the form in which the classics were disseminated in the early twentieth century did not dramatically change. However, Bourdieu's theories inherently suggest that works can either be of significant economic value *or* of significant cultural value, or perhaps somewhere on a sliding scale between the two. Resultantly, if the classics are seen as highly commercial products, according to Bourdieu, they would be unable to hold any significant cultural value, yet, as seen below, the cultural value of classical literature was tenfold.

Indeed, such cultural value is evident in Victorian appropriations of the classics as demonstrated by insights provided by reception theory. As Hardwick illuminates:

"Reception studies ... are concerned not only with individual texts and their relationship with one another, but also with the broader cultural processes which shape and make up those relationships ... In other words, factors outside the ancient source contribute to its reception and sometimes introduce new dimensions." (2003, 5)

Thus, it would appear that a culture only adopts and disseminates the classics when a strong relationship exists between the appropriating culture and the text. It seems evident that the classics provided those of the early twentieth century with symbolic value; a link between the ancient and the contemporary. Moreover, as Hardwick states, there are always

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factors outside of the source that contribute to its reception and as Fish asserts, “language does not have a shape independent of context” (1980, 268). This would suggest that it is precisely the context, the “factors outside the ancient source”, which determine how a text would be read and what cultural values would be acquired from them.

For those at the turn of the twentieth century, part of the cultural value of Latin and Roman history was their ability to act as vehicles through which contemporary politics could be debated. Vasunia argues that debates about the Roman Empire, during this period, were inseparable from assertions about the British Empire. He comes to this conclusion because all of the prominent classical writers, intellectuals and publishers, though Vasunia omits the latter, were “establishment figures ... immersed in Victorian imperial culture, and ... had a personal stake in British imperialism” (2005, 39). His account goes on to explore, and convincingly argue, that there was a powerful “collusion between classics and empire” because, as he states, “these authors derived their materials and their legitimacy from the institutionalised study of the ancient world” (39). It would therefore appear that publishing the classics, although profitable, were also published because of their cultural value; classical scholarship was a vehicle through which imperial British institutions, such as universities, could debate and promote the British Empire.

Some, such as Harrison, Thornton and Mangan would even suggest that an education in the classics was fundamentally tinted by British imperialism from a very early age. A.P. Thornton’s discussion in *Doctrines of Imperialism* states that public school education was “a training for leadership more than intellectual brilliance” and the use of

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classics was primarily used as an “ethical sanction” for the British Empire (Harrison 2005, 31; Thornton 1965, 30) and Mangan concurs. Indeed, he has shown that there was a “close and continuing association between British imperialism and the public-school system” that “was direct and substantial”, and that a significant part of this ‘imperial training’ was knowledge of the classics (1988, 6). This suggests that educational institutions intended the classics to be read almost as if they were manuals to British imperialism, and would imply that classics, at the end of the Victorian period, had become a way of perpetuating and positively coding the British Empire, something publishers would surely have been aware of.

Moreover, there was a huge emphasis placed upon the classics in order to receive a place amongst the ruling elite in government. Vasunia asserts that “Greek and Latin were almost indispensable for successful entry into the ICS [Indian Civil Service]” and that “[e]ven the non-language entrance examinations required knowledge of the ancient world, often in conjunction with the history of the modern Empire” (2005, 43). This would further suggest that the classics were viewed primarily as a mode of imperial training. This imperial training is further evidenced by the fact that Oxford University, Cambridge University and London University, which were the three main institutions that produced government officials, required an inordinate amount of classical knowledge from their students. Below is a table of the texts that were deemed to be requisites for examinations at these universities, as collated from a double page spread in the volume of *The Bookseller* from 1900 (42-3).

Examination	Classics	Roman	Greek	Other	Percentage of Classics	Percentage of Classics that are Roman
Cambridge Local Examinations – Junior and Senior (42)	11	7	4	4	73.33	63.64
Cambridge Higher Examinations	8	4	4	18	30.77	50.00
Oxford Examinations	9	7	2	0	100.00	77.78
Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board (43)	20	12	8	7	74.07	60.00
London University Examinations	15	9	6	9	62.50	60.00

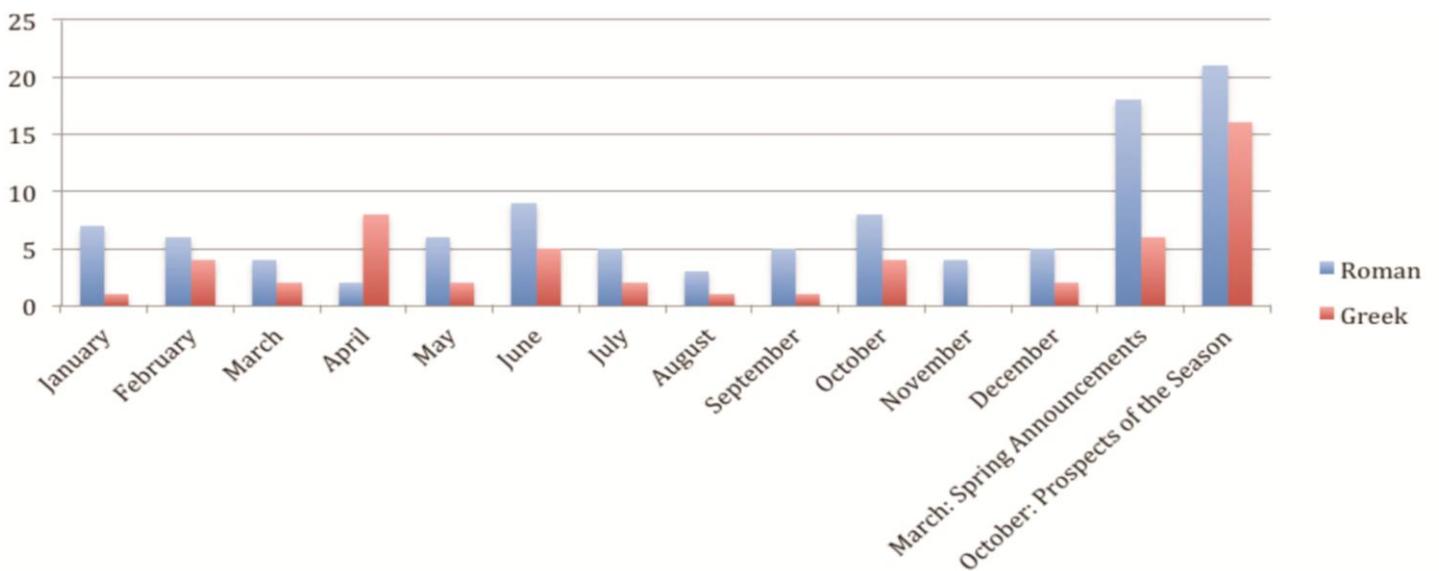
**Figure 1. Break down of texts for University Examinations 1900-1.**

As evidenced above, only the Cambridge Higher Examinations taught and tested upon more miscellaneous literature than classical though, still, almost 31% of the syllabus consisted of knowledge of the ancients. For the majority, classics appear to make up the main body of knowledge and within this, there is much more of an emphasis placed upon Roman literature and Latin.

This distinctive preference for Latin over Greek is in itself illustrative of the relationship between the classics and the British Empire. This is because, as Goff highlights, Greek and Greek history represented “one long failure to create and establish an empire” (2005, 18) and so by publishing more Roman literature, which appears to legitimise Empire, it could be argued that universities were positively reinforcing the notion of Empire. This idea can also be applied to the publishing industry because, as can be seen in Figure 2.,

publishers, as a whole, were disseminating much more Roman literature than they were Greek, with the exception of April in 1900.

**Figure 2. Classics and Translations advertised in the *The Bookseller*, 1900.**



Therefore, the publication of Latin and Roman literature could be interpreted as a political stance on the part of publishers such as: Oxford University Press, Bell, Macmillan and Cambridge University Press, because Latin reflected more favourably upon the British Empire. Hence, it could be stated that publishers attempted to circulate more Roman literature in order to bolster the imperial cause.

Moreover, Howe asserts that the mere reference to Rome automatically invokes notions of empire. As he explains, the English word 'empire' came from the Latin 'imperium' and consequently, by calling the British Empire, an 'Empire', there is an immediate connotation to the Roman Empire and all that it stood for (Howe 2002, 13). Additionally, the

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Roman *Imperium*, as Howe elaborates, meant extensive rule over far flung territories (13) and so it unsurprising that when Britain expanded its empire to include territories in India, Africa, Australia and Canada, that the Roman Empire would come to mean more to them than simply a classical education. In short, by invoking the word ‘empire’, the notion of Rome would be conjured and vice-versa. Additionally, as Richard Alston suggests, even when Rome was not explicitly mentioned in contemporary debates about India and the Empire, there was nevertheless a “core narrative” and powerful connotations that “lurk[ed] as part of the intellectual scaffolding of the time” (2010, 54).

Furthermore, whilst a lot of Latin and Roman literature published in the early twentieth century did not explicitly reference the British Empire, the physical printing of such literature turned these books into political entities. When one reviews *The Bookseller* (1900), the very first item on display is a full-page advertisement, by the Clarendon Press, for four new volumes of ‘Oxford Classical Texts’, printed on India paper. By printing on India paper these books, even if they did not mention the British Empire, were interacting with British imperialism nonetheless. One could even state that the British publishing industry was quite literally stamping the classics on to colonial products, which arguably symbolises the imposition of British values on to their imperial subjects. Subsequently, even when the content of published works does not engage with empire, the publishing industry continued to promote it through the paratext (Genette 1997), of the books themselves.

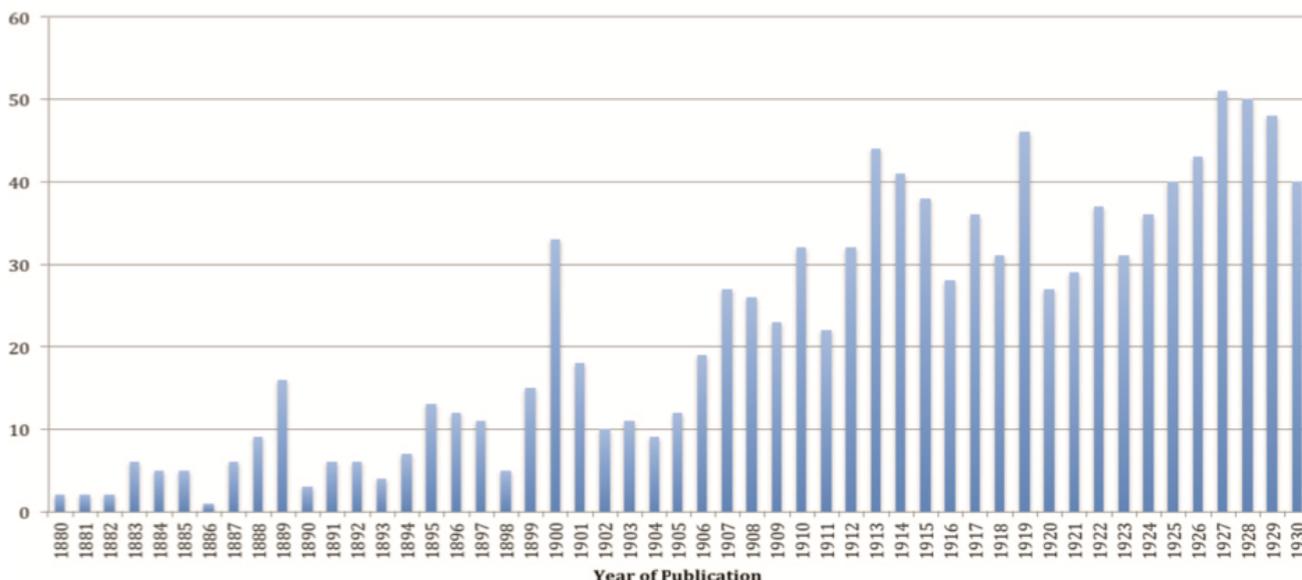
In fact, some publishers, such as Oxford University Press, which includes the Clarendon Press, would appear to further emphasise this link between the classics and

British Imperialism by publishing literature that was overt in its analogies between ancient Roman and the British Empire. In 'Greater Rome and Greater Britain', Vasunia states that the books written by Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas constituted "the most extensive of the comparisons" (2005, 39), however, what he fails to notice is that it was the Clarendon Press which published Lucas' *Greater Rome and Greater Britain* in 1912, and Oxford University Press which published Bryce's *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India* in 1914. Two of these major texts were published by the same company, which would suggest an underlying political stance on the part of Oxford University Press. Additionally, although John Murray published Cromer's *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* in 1910, the Clarendon Press pursued such analogical literature by publishing many other works, including Haverfield's *The Romanization of Roman Britain* in 1910. *The Romanization of Roman Britain*, whilst being an archaeological text, is particularly significant because, as Lakkur describes, it is a text that explicitly links the ancestry of the English to ancient Rome, distinguishing the English from all other European nations, thereby making imperial Britain the heir to imperial Rome (2006, 70). These analogical texts act as direct evidence that the classics in this period were not being published primarily for economic gain, but because of what they represented to those in support of the British Empire.

Of course, some could argue that far from being politically involved in the debates themselves, the book industry was only producing literature of this ilk because publishers, such as Oxford University Press, were quick to pick up on contemporary trends. As already stated, Cromer's *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* was published by John Murray before any of the Oxford University Press's unequivocally analogical texts, along with dozens of other

popular texts published by other companies such as Brabzon’s *Our Empire’s Past and Present* published by Harrison and Sons in 1905, Seeley’s *The Expansion of England* published by Macmillan and Co. in 1909, or Pollard’s *The British Empire* published by The League of the Empire also in 1909. In fact, The Classical Review is able to track the key words and topics in all of its articles and, as can be seen in Figure 3., there was an extraordinary trend of discussing Empire in conjunction with the classics during this period.

**Figure 3. The number of articles printed in The Classical Review that included the key word**



**‘Empire’.**

Resultantly, it could be stated that when publishers printed literature that appeared to equate the Roman and British Empires, they did so simply to exploit the reading public and their interests.

However, to state this would be to mistakenly infer that those within the British publishing industry did not interact with contemporary opinion and trends. As Said stated:

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“[n]o one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society.” (2010, 1873)

This statement is applicable to the work of early twentieth century publishers as well. Publishers were just as affected by the contemporary debates surrounding the classics and the Empire as their readers, and just as influential in the decisions about what to publish. Indeed, reputation was everything for publishers at the turn of the twentieth century and so it would seem foolish to suggest that they would sacrifice their integrity in order to publish texts that they did not believe in, or value. As Darnton’s *Communication Circuit* demonstrates, publishers have their own autonomous faction, which is imposed upon by neither readers nor authors (2002, 12). This would suggest that publishers such as Oxford University Press commissioned and published so many books equating the Roman and British Empire because they chose to.

Moreover, the social world and contemporary politics had a huge impact upon publishers and their decisions. Darnton’s circuit demonstrates the influence of the economic, social, intellectual, political and legal on all aspects of the circuit, including publishers, by placing these factors in the centre (2002, 12). Similarly, the social world is of particular importance when evaluating the motivations behind publishing during this period because, as Butler writes, the late “Victorians increasingly adopted a ‘presentist’ approach to reading Roman texts, reading them, more or less, as Peter Barry puts it, ‘exclusively in

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terms of the present” (Butler 2012; Barry, 2009, 292). Therefore, it seems imperative that the classics should be read in the context of the ‘New Imperialism’ of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, but also in the context of the lives of individual publishers.

One of the most influential members of the Clarendon Press between 1898 and 1919 was Charles Cannan, described by Roger Louis as the “mastermind” behind the press (2013, 1). Cannan’s background was very classical and so it is unsurprising to see that the classics were given centre-stage on the Clarendon list, especially given his institutionalised past as a fellow and tutor in Classics at Oxford (Louis 2013, 560). Moreover, his attitude to colonialism and British Empire is clear given that he was one of the main driving forces behind setting up Oxford University Press offices in Canada (1904), Australia (1908) India (1912) and in South Africa in 1915 (Suthcliffe 1978, 115). Suthcliffe writes that Cannan believed that “Oxford books must be made to sell all over the world” and that it would be “an affront to conscience to think that any part of the British Empire should be deprived of the benefits of British civilization” (1978, 115). Accordingly, it would appear that Cannan was of the opinion that the British Empire could only benefit from British culture and ‘civilization’, and that publishing the classics all over the world would only improve upon foreign cultures. In short, he was in favour of cultural imperialism and by extension the British Empire, because, without such colonialism, Oxford University Press would have been unable to expand quite so quickly, and unable to spread British culture quite so effectively.

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Indeed, publishing the classics across the globe, and even publishing in England, is inextricably linked to discourses of power and dominion, bonding the politics of literature with notions of imperialism. As Haynes states, "[l]anguage is not only a medium of communication; it is also a medium of domination and social power" (2006, 48), suggesting that regardless of whether it is classical literature or another genre being circulated, language is able to oppress and suppress others. In England, as Goff highlights, publishing the classics was intimately linked with social power because:

“Latin and Greek language and culture were so inseparable from the elite’s vision of itself that they become inseparable from the vision of the imperial role, and they could wield more extensive influence ... because they could connect European elites which otherwise were divided by national languages. The role of classics in elite culture also predisposes it in another way to be closely connected with imperial projects: because classics bears with it the weight of tradition and authority” (2005, 11).

Hence, it would appear as if publishing the classics was about more than discussing the politics of empire, it was also about imbuing the elite with the power of empire, legitimising their sovereignty and asserting their own superiority.

To conclude, undoubtedly the classics represented an excellent economic investment for publishers, such as the Oxford University Press, due to the continued and even increased demand for the topic. However, as shown, this was not the sole or primary reason why the classics were disseminated during this period. The classics, and particularly

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Latin and Roman culture were inexorably linked to Empire and the politics of imperialism. They represented profit but were also a platform on which discussions about the Empire could rest; a way in which the educated ruling elite held on to power and exclusivity in government; a method with which to reinforce elitist identity; and a means of supporting the British Empire, to which such positive attributes as civilisation and commerce had been assigned. Indeed, "Rome was remade and rewritten in accordance with a modern agenda" (Butler 2012) and publishers disseminated this 're-making' in accordance with their own political stances. Publishers used Ancient Rome to positively portray the British Empire and the British Empire as a link back to Rome. British publishers were proud to consider themselves Roman.

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