Britain/Empire/Commonwealth

Fall 2012

You must do a total of three (3) questions.

Be sure each essay has a clear line of argument, addresses as many dimensions of the question as possible, and offers relevant, persuasive evidence from specific secondary sources wherever appropriate. Good luck!

Section A. PICK ONE

1. According to Bill Schwarz, “England learned from its frontier societies how to become a properly white man’s country.” (How) is this contention born out by two decades and more of imperial histories, whether new or old? What does it mean to stage the white settler man – whether in the 18th c. Caribbean, 19th century British Columbia or 20th century South Africa – as a pivot for the development of the modern English imperial nation-state and its political, social and cultural histories? Who would contest such claim, and why?

2. Since the publication of Said’s Orientalism, scholars of empire have understood texts to be an important source for understanding the relationship between metropole and colony. However, approaches to textual readings are often divided between literary scholars’ reading of texts as freestanding, disembodied objects of inquiry, while other scholars emphasize the material conditions of production and circulation. What are tensions between these two approaches, what are their respective limits and possibilities?

Section B. PICK ONE

1. Empire was crucial to British political debate and policy between 1829 and 1905 (at least). What does it mean to frame Victorian Britain between the poles of Catholic Emancipation and the Alien Act, and what are the consequences of that move? Must such a history be a story of elites only or can it accommodate the view from below? What, in other words, is the Whig narrative and how do new imperial histories re-set the political history of the nation? What have these interventions accomplished, what has remained in place, and what remains to be done?

2. What is the proportional role of empire in histories of the United Kingdom? To what extent should the various Acts of Union and subsequent incorporation of the “Celtic peripheries” be understood as imperial history and to what extent is that model unsatisfactory? What role did the British (as opposed to the English) play in the empire? What was the relationship between the making of the United Kingdom (1707-1921?) and the making of the British empire?

Section C. PICK ONE

1. To what extent has the core-periphery model of nation and empire/home-and-away been supplemented, even superseded, by transnational, intra-colonial and global alternatives? Is the story of the Island Race primarily an oceanic or a territorial one? If the former, how does one
plot the state and its agents? If the latter, what is the right and proper role of migration, mobility, commodity and labor flows in shaping its parameters? (Why) have these questions been asked mainly outside Britain proper, by ex-colonial peoples? What is, in short, a postcolonial history of Britain?

2. Construct a syllabus of 18th and 19th century Britain that charts the history and historiography of labor in Britain and the British empire. How can the making of the English working class be understood not merely as a national event, but as a history that intersects with the history of slavery, indenture, and imperial trade and expansion. What events would you highlight, what chronologies would structure the course, what geographies (imaginative and material) would you map?