Dear all, many thanks for reading this Frankenstein draft. This was submitted as a grant proposal and so for the most part takes a very wide, interdisciplinary lens, but the final part details the logistics and the dissertation’s chapter outline. I am struggling with the chapter outline and the comparative aspects but would love any feedback you have on any part of the project!

**Three Acres and a Plough: Agricultural Imperialism in Britain’s Settler Empire, 1873-1918**

This dissertation is a new history of the wheat trade told from the ground up, through the lens of settler-Indigenous relations in two British colonies from the crash of the stock market in 1873 to the First World War. British historians frame the emergence of a global food system in the 1870s and debates about free trade versus protection as two of the most salient issues defining domestic politics during the fin-de-siècle period.[[1]](#footnote-1) Historians of the British empire have demonstrated how Irish and Indian peasants suffered tremendous dearth and famine at the hands of imperial agricultural policy.[[2]](#footnote-2) My project builds out the historiography on Ireland and India by exploring how the expropriation of Aboriginal peoples and the incorporation of their lands into global agricultural supply chains affected the social dynamics of land use and ownership on the ground in Canada and Australia. The paper seeks to uncover how British demand for grain drove territorial expansion in these “frontier societies,” but it does so by viewing wheat fields not as “vacant” expanses awaiting cultivation, as past studies have, but rather as active sites of conflict over land and resources among private grain industry representatives, state and colonial officials, and Indigenous groups.

I am interested in three overarching questions. First, the project asks how the exigencies of the grain trade in the settler dominions gave rise to novel land acquisition strategies by colonial governments, including the consolidation and amendment of the treaty system in Canada and the passage of a series of Aborigines Acts in Australia. Second, it considers how the expansion of the wheat trade in the settler colonies changed, limited, and upended Indigenous peoples’ access to natural resources, particularly food and land, in these places, giving rise to a series of ecological and subsistence crises in the plains. And third, it asks what role Indigenous peoples played in the wheat trade. Based on preliminary findings, I argue that British, Canadian, and Australian colonial administrators drew heavily on the revival of liberal political economy’s idealization of the peasant proprietor in an attempt not only to establish white farmers in the grain-growing regions in each place, but also to introduce European-style farming to the Plains Cree in Canada and the Kaurna peoples in the Adelaide Plains. Doing so appealed to the requirements of Britain’s imperial project for two reasons. On one hand, in both places farming, before residential schools or political citizenship, was touted as the primary means of cultural assimilation; on the other, settling these lands according to the family-farm model provided colonial administrators with a convenient cover to apportion and chop up arable land. These questions reframe late-nineteenth-century agricultural transformations in terms of the “new imperialism,” rather than viewing them as discrete, isolated, and “natural” processes untethered from the social, political, and economic demands of the empire.

The project is comparative in nature, but its chosen sites require explanation. Synthetic studies by Alfred Crosby and John C. Weaver provide a precedent for comparing land tenure models in food-exporting regions.[[3]](#footnote-3) Past studies of Britain and the grain trade have compared frontier development in Canada and Argentina—the Prairies and the Pampas—tracing the divergent patterns of land tenure that emerged, abetted by British capital, in the fertile lands of each place,[[4]](#footnote-4) while a substantial body of literature has explored attempts by the British government to create a wheat industry in India using tenant farm labor.[[5]](#footnote-5) My project uses a different optic for comparison, focusing on how Dominion governments adopted patterns of land ownership based on liberal political economists’ craze for “peasant proprietorship” and closely resembling homesteading policy in the United States.[[6]](#footnote-6) Reversing the usual frame of comparison, which focuses on export levels, and underscoring land tenancy type, provides a clearer view of the idiosyncrasies of the Indian and Argentinian wheat industries, both of which developed according to the model of large estates worked by tenant farmers, much like that which had existed in Britain for centuries. In Canada and Australia, by contrast, colonial administrators did not seek to transform Indigenous peoples into a reserve labor force, but rather sought to settle or displace them to “open up” space for wheat crops. Using an approach that puts rural communities, local actors, and Indigenous peoples first, the project is not a global history of the wheat industry in its entirety, but a history of grain and settler-colonial expansion in the British empire.

Historical Background

Writing in 1935, George Orwell knew that modern Britain was “founded on coal,” but he overlooked the fact that Britain’s industrial climb was built on wheat as well as coal, a point which his forebears would have understood all too well.[[7]](#footnote-7) As successive generations abandoned the rural counties and flocked to English cities in search of work throughout the nineteenth century, the domestic cereal industry ceased yielding enough crops to feed a hungry population. Conservative Prime Minister Robert Peel famously repealed the protectionist corn laws in 1846, alienating himself from his key supporters—agriculturally-dependent country gentlemen—in an effort to keep bread prices down.[[8]](#footnote-8) The quandary of how to feed a growing industrial labor force was compounded by a series of harvest failures and economic crises that nearly wiped out British farming altogether in the years between 1873 and 1914.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Indeed, by 1873, a year when British farming was at its most precarious, English farmers could feed their neighbors for only 8 weeks of the year.[[10]](#footnote-10) Free trade in wheat became a rallying cry for radicals and liberals alike, for whom the watchword of “cheap bread” became a figurative call-to-arms against the Tory opposition’s “dear bread.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Arguments for cheap grain imports were not made entirely in the name of principle or goodwill. Instead, they bore the mark of reality too, as Britain’s economy, based on manufactured goods, could by no means support its swelling population.

From the repeal of the corn laws in 1846 to the 1870s, the British came to rely on wheat imports from Odessa, in the Baltic, as well as the American Midwest -- both territories evidently beyond imperial control. When it became clear to ministers in Whitehall that Britain would need more grain more of the time, they sought out solutions in the empire’s territories, turning first to India before helping to establish major wheat exporting rackets in Canada, Australia, and Argentina. They also continued trade with private European firms, such as Continental, Bunge, and Louis-Dreyfus, based in the United States.[[12]](#footnote-12) The English grain market was the largest international market ever before seen.[[13]](#footnote-13) What facilitated the formation of this market was the extension of the family farm model in key regions of settlement, including the United States, Australia, and Canada.

Indeed, coincident with the shift away from Baltic and Indian wheat exports in the 1880s was the mass emigration of white settlers who left Europe in hopes of acquiring farmland elsewhere. Boom cities cropped up out of necessity all over the “Anglosphere,” emerging primarily as centers to process, expel, store, and ship grain products.[[14]](#footnote-14) As a result, during this age of “new imperialism,” at the very same moment when European leaders in Berlin partitioned Africa, Anglophone colonists slowly but surely reached deeper and deeper into the arable regions of empire, passing land legislation as they went. To accommodate and facilitate this settlement, the British imperial government, as well as Dominion governments in Canada and Australia, enacted a series of homesteading acts designed to entice white Britons to stay, “cultivate” the dominion lands, and in turn to provide a steady source of wheat to the hungry metropole.

As agricultural depression wracked Britain’s rural counties, the country came to rely almost exclusively on these imports for grain, with 3 out of every 4 loaves of bread baked from wheat grown abroad. A handful of agrarian historians in Britain have understood the importance of this commodity; their work shows that in the period leading up to the first world war, two-thirds of international trade by volume was in foodstuffs, with wheat at the top of the list, followed by meat, sugar, tea, tobacco, coffee, and cocoa, in that order.[[15]](#footnote-15) We now have excellent histories of meat, sugar, tea, tobacco, coffee, and cocoa, but historians have not adequately explored the significance of grain to social and imperial relations in the late nineteenth century.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Relevance to History and Other Disciplines

My project makes three interventions of interest to historians, anthropologists, and political theorists. First, it brings agrarian history and the history of settler colonialism into the same frame. This is essential because historians of the British empire to date have thoroughly isolated agriculture and rural history from broader historical metanarratives by framing agrarian change as part of discrete regional or national processes. The narrowness of this approach does not characterize the field of Agrarian Studies in its entirety, as is evidenced by a handful of probing books recently published in a series edited by James C. Scott at Yale, but narrowness is clearly a characteristic of the British imperial historiography. Domestic literature on grain focuses primarily on agricultural failure in Britain, while studies of agricultural pursuits in the settler colonies rarely pay heed to the links between empire and metropole.[[17]](#footnote-17) In short, though Lenin dubbed wheat “the currency of currencies,” historians have not accorded it such status. And while economists and world systems theorists have done more to place the wheat industry at the center of globalization’s history, framing it as part of an explosion of markets at the end of the nineteenth century, their analyses tend to leave people out of the story.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is a disappointing oversight as the plains were never empty.

Second, the project contributes to a rich and valuable body of literature on the relationship between liberalism and empire written by intellectual historians and political theorists. Scholars have spilled considerable ink attempting to understand how the ideological tenets of liberalism shifted in the nineteenth century, moving away from J.S. Mill’s purportedly universalist “liberal” empire towards a more culturalist, late imperial ideology espoused by anthropologist and civil servant Henry Sumner Maine.[[19]](#footnote-19) A related body of work has demonstrated how in the Bengal region, Lockean notions of property-ownership were turned upside down, re-appropriated by Indian peasant proprietors as a means of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist protest.[[20]](#footnote-20) With remarkable intelligence, these writers have shown how nineteenth-century liberal theorists deployed a vast and cumbersome epistemological cover to justify the ongoing violence of Britain’s imperial project and how, in turn, the ideology was re-formulated as critique by colonized subjects.

Yet looking to the settler dominions reveals alternative trajectories and overlapping characteristics of the liberal political-economic model across the empire. To date, these trajectories have been concealed in existing scholarship by a binary often drawn between settler states and the rest of the empire.[[21]](#footnote-21) Viewed from the constitutional perspective, these differences are salient, but the turn of the century saw an intensification of Indigenous segregation, surveillance, and forced removal in the settler dominions which fits more closely within existing scholarship on the ends of liberal universalism than scholars have previously recognized. Land, rather than constitutional politics, most clearly reveals how a politics of expediency was developed in Dominions as well. With this in mind, I view the project as fitting well within this established body of literature on liberalism and empire but bringing in an alternative set of regional case studies and methodological tools.

Third, the project contributes to a body of literature sometimes dubbed the “new history of capitalism.” As evidenced by a range of new commodity histories from cotton to sugar, American historians have been at the forefront of re-embedding business history into accounts of nineteenth-century political change.[[22]](#footnote-22) But as historian Deborah Cohen points out, those interested in Britain have not revisited the history of capitalism with the same level of enthusiasm as their American counterparts, a point well illustrated by the fact that the best standard account of international business in Britain’s long nineteenth century is thirty years old.[[23]](#footnote-23) Where exceptions to this rule exist, virtually none explore the history of grain, agriculture, or rural life, even though grain was a commodity arguably as important to the British economy as coal in this period. What my project brings to this new history of capitalism is an emphasis on food justice in an age of climate catastrophe, with a focus on how drives to open up new markets and territories for agricultural settlement produced racialized, gendered, and classed divisions which profoundly impacted access to natural resources on the ground. By offering an environmental vantage, the paper makes a novel intervention into the thin but growing literature on the “new” history of capitalism in Britain.

Interdisciplinary Theoretical Frameworks

In addition to building out these historiographies, the project is necessarily interdisciplinary, borrowing from anthropologists, sociologists, political theorists, ecologists, and others. From anthropologists and political theorists such as Elizabeth Povinelli, Glen Coulthard, Audra Simpson, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, I draw upon a robust literature detailing mechanisms of oppression and exclusion in “liberal” settler colonies.[[24]](#footnote-24) In particular, I make use of Povinelli’s writings on Indigenous alterities in Australia, which explore how liberal multiculturalism in settler states invites an embrace of customary practices by demanding that colonized subjects enact an “impossible standard of authentic traditional culture” while denying the mutable realities of life under settler-colonial rule. I apply Povinelli’s willingness to play with the categories of “tradition” and “authenticity” by interrogating how in some instances Plains Cree and Kaurna Peoples took up European-style farming in the plains only to find their efforts foiled by Indian agents and colonial officials bent on enforcing peasant modes of production. Bringing Povinelli’s critique of liberal multiculturalism into conversation with agricultural production makes Coulthard’s research particularly salient, since he explores the centrality of land to Indigenous resistance, highlighting how time and again the Canadian government has manipulated the politics of “reconciliation” to appropriate land and facilitate capitalist development. These theorists, as well as scholars of settler colonialism, have provided essential frameworks for thinking about land, liberalism, and settler colonialism together.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In addition to drawing from Indigenous theorists working on settler colonialism, I also borrow from sociologists the useful framing of the “ecological rift of capitalism,” which uses Karl Marx’s insights into the way that agricultural production robs the “soil” by creating a metabolic “rift” between nature and its human inhabitants.[[26]](#footnote-26) Marx, in addition to positing his famous labor theory of value, also expressed a lesser-known theory detailing how British high farming eroded soil, eliminated nutrients and environments, and ultimately created a disconnect between humans and their surroundings. Given the timeliness of Marx’s observations, sociologists have been at the forefront of an effort to re-evaluate the relationship between capitalism and agricultural conditions; their contemporary analyses, as such, frame my historical ones.

Chapter Structure and Sources

The dissertation necessarily relies on a wide range of primary sources and oscillates between micro and macro contexts. It aims to bridge the intellectual and political history of turn-of-the-century British, Canadian, and Australian agriculture while paying attention to how the development of the wheat industry shaped access to resources on the ground. With these joint intentions in mind, the dissertation uses parliamentary commissions from each location, political theorists’ writings on land and empire, and local newspapers from the South Australian plains and the Canadian prairies. The research plan, which is broken up into three-month chunks in England, Canada, and Australia, mimics the project’s organizational structure, insofar as I intend to write three equally weighted parts.

For **part one,** I will conduct on-site work in England, where I hope to collect archival research for the first two chapters using private and public documents describing the “land question” in Britain to 1885. Chapter one considers the Victorian vogue for peasant proprietorship as an imagined solution to the inequalities wrought by the existing structure of agrarian capitalism in England. It details how the peasant proprietor model came to be seen as a moral solution, not only for the case of Ireland, but as a salve for income inequality and transformations in the gender order during the period. Chapter two considers how, though it failed to take root in England, this same model became the idealized blueprint for the settler colonies, providing agricultural labourers with an incentive to emigrate in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Like chapter one, chapter two uses parliamentary commissions and the writings of social theorists, but it also explores the records of the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union to consider the place of the settler colonies in emigration schemes for farm workers. Together, both chapters bridge intellectual and political history methods, harnessing parliamentary records, in addition to the writings of liberal theorists such as J.S. Mill on the land question or the rural idyll in J.A. Froude’s vision of a united and heroic settler frontier.

**Part two** moves away from the metropolitan context and turns to look at two case studies, scrutinizing how colonial officials and land agents sought to implement small-holding and peasant farming policies through land acts in the Canadian Prairies and South Australia from 1885. Though by the time Canada became a major wheat exporter the Numbered Treaties in Manitoba had already been set in place, the period from 1885, after the Northwest Rebellion, saw the passage of a series of land acts designed to install the liberal allotment system for settlers and to break up “tribal communism” through land sale and the implementation of reserve farming among the Saulteaux, Anishinaabe, and Ojibway. Chapter three explores how the drive to create land allotments often flew in the face of honouring treaty commitments made in the 1870s. It uses annual reports from the Department of Indian Affairs and the papers of Land Agent turned Indian Agent Hayter Reed (McCord Museum, Montreal) to explore how colonial officials attempted to translate liberal ideas about land into reality through the passage of homesteading and land acts.

While the focus of chapter three is on Canadian landholding, the next chapter, which turns to Australia, emphasizes the closely linked issue of food and food politics. In both Canada and Australia, Dominion governments used rationing to create settler space, withholding food to enforce removal, reserve allocation, or dispersal. Chapter four considers state food policy as a tool of colonial control in the grain-growing regions of South Australia. Here, colonial administrators focused on a policy of “dispersal” using the legal alibi of *Terra Nullius*, producing a system of land settlement that looked sharply different than it did in the Plains regions in Canada or the United States. Still, towards the end of the nineteenth-century state officials across the empire began using rations and food policy to enforce containment and removal across all these cases. This chapter examines South Australia’s rations policy, which differed from other parts of the empire, but I compare it to how colonial governments used rations in the opening of arable land in the North American plains as well.

**Part three** explores the development of the wheat industry more closely, examining the “unholy alliance” between macro-capitalists, merchants, and farmers as an optic for understanding how Canada and Australia became major wheat exporting nations at the turn of the century. It explores how the wheat industry in both Canada and Australia developed along lines at odds with intellectuals and immigration agents’ hopes of creating a small-holding, property-owning class of self-sufficient imperial settlers by exploring the groups who made fortunes from the development of settler agriculture (and those who were excluded from these benefits). Chapter five does this by looking at the development of large, commercial farms, focusing on the structure of the labor force on farms in both Australia and Canada. Chapter six uses the records of Lord Strathcona and his son-in-law, Baron Stephen Mount, both of whom made their careers financing railway infrastructure in Canada and were subsequently elevated to the peerage in the metropole. The final chapter uses the records of the London Corn Trade and Liverpool Corn Trade Associations to explore the secret but lucrative world of transatlantic grain merchants. In this part, I frame the wheat industry as creating a “new” landed elite, following up on F.M.L. Thompson’s call to investigate those aristocrats who profited from imperial landholdings even as their fellow countrymen experienced a crisis of the landed interest at home.

This structure, bookended by chapters on the metropolitan context, stems from the project’s aim to write a history of settler colonial and plains land policy that fits within our existing meta-narratives of Britain and its empire during the fin-de-siecle. Indigenous theorists in settler states have recognized land and resource use as perhaps the most salient feature defining colonial politics in the past and present; historians of Australia and Canada have written considerable amounts about the creation of reservation systems, the development of prairie capitalism, and the intertwined histories of staple agricultural production and colonial state-making in each place. A wager of this dissertation is that agriculture, land tenure, and land law played an equally salient role in British thinking about the settler-colonial empire, influencing British, Canadian, and Australian agents and officials across the Dominions.

Chapter Structure

Part I: Land in Politics and Thought, 1860-1885

Ch. 1: The Late Victorian Land Question

Ch. 2: Agricultural Depression and Imperial Solutions

Part II: Making Agricultural Space, 1870-1900

Ch. 3: Land Legislation and the Making of the Wheatfields in the Canadian Prairies

Ch. 4: Food Policy, Rations, and “Dispersal” in South Australia

Part III: An Unholy Alliance: Farmers and Merchants, 1900-1918

Ch. 5: Farmers

Ch. 6: Railway Barons

Ch. 7: Grain Merchants

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Ch. 6: Railway Barons

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Ch. 7: Merchants

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