



ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

British Humanitarianism, Indigenous Rights, and Imperial Crises: Assessing the Membership Base of the Aborigines' Protection Society, 1840–73

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Abstract

A confluence of societal changes, particularly hardening racial attitudes following the Indian Mutiny in 1857 and the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865, resulted in widescale disillusionment with imperial humanitarian projects in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. As this article demonstrates, however, the membership and income of the Aborigines' Protection Society (APS) increased at precisely the moments when this disillusionment was at its sharpest. This article combines quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the nature of the Society's mid-century membership base, demonstrating that, rather than a monolithic decline, a humanitarian polarization took place in response to imperial crises that led some (largely Tories) to disillusionment and others (largely Whigs) to entrenchment. Furthermore, by attending to discursive trends within speeches at APS annual meetings as well as in private correspondence between members and the secretary of the Society, I explore how APS members explained the connection between their own lives and the treatment of distant Indigenous peoples in the colonies. Finding that British Indigenous rights activism was only seldomly expressed in terms of Indigenous peoples themselves, I show that support for the APS was most commonly related to concerns for friends and family living in the colonies, along with disquiet about the impact of colonial injustices on international competition. This enabled Indigenous rights activists to continue their efforts in the face of disillusionment with the capabilities of racialized "others."

The historiography of mid-Victorian Britain emphasizes a confluence of societal developments that challenged humanitarian commitment to Indigenous rights activism. "Telescopic philanthropy" was subject to vocal and vitriolic critique in the mid-nineteenth century on the grounds that it was effeminate, sanctimonious, harmful to economic development, demoralizing to recipients, and against the laws of nature.¹ The domestic charity market exploded at the same time, creating competition for funds that were more likely to be spent on domestic than foreign initiatives.² Racialized disdain for Indigenous peoples grew in relation to developments in scientific understandings of evolution, reactions against colonial warfare and rebellions, and efforts to downplay class-based explanations for Fenianism, parliamentary reform, and urban poverty.³

¹ Hugh Cunningham, *The Reputation of Philanthropy since 1750: Britain and Beyond* (Manchester, 2020), 107–55.

² Sarah Roddy, Julie-Marie Strange, and Bertrand Taithe, *The Charity Market and Humanitarianism in Britain, 1870–1912* (New York, 2018), 1–7.

³ Patrick Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians* (Ithaca, 2011), 111–35.

Moral justifications that attempted to legitimize imperialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a “civilizing mission” were replaced with rhetoric about stability and order.⁴ The settler colonies took on new importance as markets for domestic products and capital at the same time that many were becoming self-governing, thus disincentivizing metropolitan Britons from interfering in colonial politics.⁵ In addition, the problematic outcomes of a range of humanitarian projects, such as the catastrophic Niger expedition in 1841 and the resurgence of settler violence in Liberia in the 1850s, led to widespread disillusionment regarding the possibility of making imperialism moral and just.⁶

These developments particularly undermined the sustainability of the Aborigines’ Protection Society (APS). Operating between 1837–1909, the APS was founded upon a belief that Britain and its colonies treated Indigenous peoples immorally, unjustly, and dishonorably. To that end, the APS was “specially devoted to the interests of the Aborigines, in their preservation and improvement,” primarily by raising public awareness of Indigenous rights issues and petitioning the British government “to regulate, as far as law can do so, all the acts of the Colonial Government and of the colonists which influence the progress of the coloured races.”⁷ It is important to recognize that the APS’s vision of Indigenous rights is very different from modern understandings of rights to self-determination, cultural heritage, and territorial sovereignty.⁸ Members of the APS often understood Indigenous peoples to have some rights as British subjects, some rights as original holders of land, and some rights for being civilized and hard-working, but there was also no clear consensus within the organization as to whether Indigenous peoples were to be recognized as free citizens or wards of the state. Instead, Victorian notions of Indigenous rights were carefully limited to abstract and often contradictory ideas about the right to enjoy the benefits of European civilization, the right to be adequately compensated for land loss, and the right to be protected by (and assimilated within) British law.

Indigenous rights activism was only one sub-section of imperial humanitarianism in the nineteenth century, a broad category of philanthropic endeavor that included anti-slavery, anti-convict transportation, famine relief, mission work, and war casualty relief.⁹ Nevertheless, the APS is typically assumed to have followed the overall downward trend within imperial humanitarianism as a whole, with historians generally agreeing that it suffered from declining interest from the 1840s onward, with an upswing in popularity around the time of the Scramble for Africa in the 1880s. However, in 1865 the APS boasted a 93 percent higher annual income and an 81 percent larger membership base than it had in 1840. Given that the British GDP and population only increased in this period by 75 percent and 33 percent respectively,¹⁰ these trends in the APS’s membership reveal not just continuity but even relative growth. Clearly, their members perceived a value to the APS that defied broad societal changes around philanthropy, racial attitudes, and humanitarianism. Why the APS continued to garner support throughout the mid-Victorian years therefore requires closer interrogation.

⁴ Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, 2010), 11.

⁵ Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016), 32–48.

⁶ Zoë Laidlaw, “Slavery, Settlers and Indigenous Dispossession: Britain’s Empire through the Lens of Liberia,” *Journal of Colonialism & Colonial History* 13, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2012.0005>; Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison, 1964), 289–317.

⁷ Aborigines’ Protection Society, *The First Annual Report of the Aborigines Protection Society, Presented at the Meeting in Exeter Hall, May 16th, 1838, with List of Officers, Subscribers, and Benefactors* (London, 1838), 5, 25.

⁸ For an in-depth exploration of the modern approach to Indigenous rights, see Alexandra Xanthaki, *Indigenous Rights and United Nations Standards: Self-Determination, Culture and Land* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁹ Rebecca Gill, *Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War, Britain 1870–1914* (Manchester, 2013); Hilary Carey, *Empire of Hell: Religion and the Campaign to End Convict Transportation in the British Empire, 1788–1875* (Cambridge, 2019); Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, 2012); Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 2004); Andrea Major, “British Humanitarian Political Economy and Famine in India, 1838–1842,” *Journal of British Studies* 59, no. 2 (2020): 221–44, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2019.293>.

¹⁰ Stephen Broadberry et al., *British Economic Growth, 1270–1870* (Cambridge, 2015), 226–44.

A quantitative assessment of APS members shows that there was a temporal correlation between warfare in the colonies, APS membership and income levels, and antagonism toward the APS in national newspapers. This correlation reveals a fragmented and polarized humanitarian community, split largely along political party lines, rather than a general decline in support for humanitarian causes. Moreover, reading this quantitative data alongside rhetorical trends within speeches at APS annual meetings and private correspondence between members and the secretary shows that support for the APS was seldom articulated in terms of upholding the rights of Indigenous peoples themselves. Instead, Indigenous rights activism was more often expressed in terms of personal concerns about the impact of colonial warfare on friends and family who had emigrated and wider anxieties about Britain's moral reputation in the international arena. Examining the APS's membership base reveals that Indigenous rights activism was a mutable concept. It proliferated in the mid-Victorian period, despite declining humanitarian sentiment, by shifting its focus from protecting Indigenous peoples to protecting both Britons themselves and the idea of a moral British Empire in an increasingly tense and competitive geo-political climate.

Quantifying Indigenous Rights Activism

According to Alan Lester and Fae Dussart's model, humanitarian projects always entail three kinds of agents: donors who supply resources, practitioners who apply resources, and recipients who are the intended beneficiaries of humanitarian action.¹¹ Each group brings their own interests to the table and mediates humanitarian projects in different ways. The APS was no exception. As Zoë Laidlaw explains, it operated through the entwined agencies of "a small group of committed individuals who attempted to win donations and support from a much larger penumbra of less-engaged members of the middle classes."¹² Its operation was further mediated by various Indigenous and colonized peoples who used the APS for their own purposes.¹³ However, scholarly attention has focused primarily on that small group of committed individuals, such as members of the Buxton family, Thomas Hodgkin, Henry Fox Bourne, and John Harris,¹⁴ as well as a few select donors from the colonies.¹⁵ Much less is known about rank-and-file members and their reasons for continuing to support the APS at a historical moment when the British public in general was losing

¹¹ Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge, 2014), 10.

¹² Zoë Laidlaw, "'Justice to India—Prosperity to England—Freedom to the Slave!' Humanitarian and Moral Reform Campaigns on India, Aborigines and American Slavery," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, no. 2 (2012): 299–324, at 304, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186312000247>.

¹³ Darren Reid, "The Aborigines' Protection Society as an Anticolonial Network: Rethinking the APS 'from the Bottom up' through Letters Written by Black South Africans, 1883–87," *Journal of Colonialism & Colonial History* 22, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2021.0028>; Darren Reid, "Shadrach Boyce Mama and the 'Kaffir Depot': Navigating Imperial Networks to Agitate against the Forced Removal of Xhosa Women and Children from Cape Town, May–December 1879," *South African Historical Journal* 72, no. 4 (2020): 561–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2020.1827018>.

¹⁴ James Heartfield, *The Aborigines' Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, and the Congo, 1836–1909* (New York, 2011); Zoë Laidlaw, *Protecting the Empire's Humanity: Thomas Hodgkin and British Colonial Activism 1830–1870* (Cambridge, 2021); Zoë Laidlaw, "'Aunt Anna's Report': The Buxton Women and the Aborigines Select Committee, 1835–37," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086530410001700381>; Ronald Rainger, "Philanthropy and Science in the 1830's: The British and Foreign Aborigines' Protection Society," *Man* 14, no. 4 (1980): 702–17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2801541>; Kenneth Nwora, "The Aborigines' Protection Society, 1889–1909: A Pressure-Group in Colonial Policy," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 5, no. 1 (1971): 79–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.1971.10803626>; Susan Willmington, "The Activities of the Aborigines Protection Society as a Pressure Group on the Formulation of Colonial Policy, 1868–1880" (PhD diss., Lampeter, St David's University College, 1973); Charles Swaisland, "The Aborigines Protection Society and British Southern and West Africa" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1968).

¹⁵ Laidlaw, *Protecting the Empire's Humanity*, 187–229; Elizabeth Elbourne, *Empire, Kinship and Violence: Family Histories, Indigenous Rights and the Making of Settler Colonialism, 1770–1842* (Cambridge, 2023), 151–304.

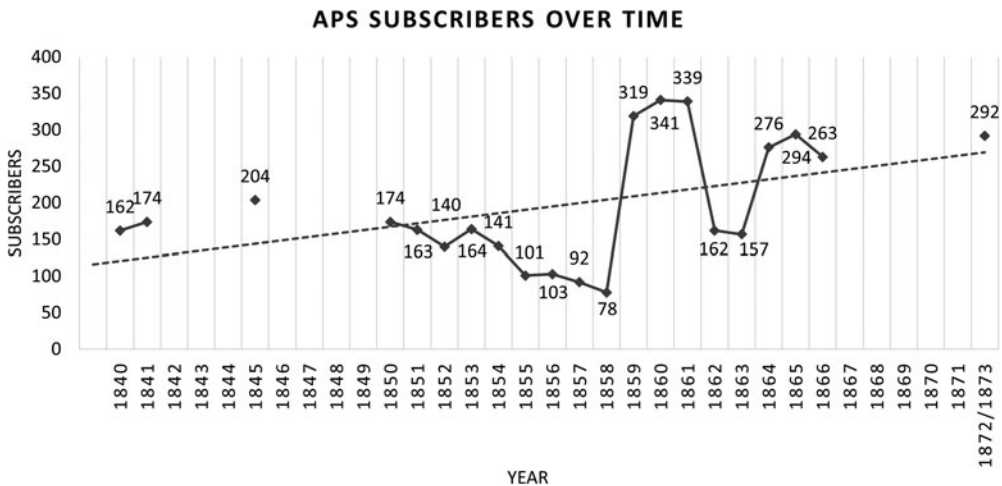


Figure 1. APS subscribers over time from 1840–72/73. See Appendix 2 for sources included in the analysis.

interest in Indigenous rights and when broad humanitarian sentiment was in decline. Refocusing attention on this population shifts our understanding not only of the APS but also of the multiple uses of humanitarian discourses in mid-Victorian Britain.

Quantitative methodologies provide a useful starting point for building a more nuanced understanding of the APS's membership base. I quantified APS membership levels by creating a database of all subscribers between 1840–1873, using subscriber lists and treasury statements published in annual reports to populate the database with names, amounts donated, and years of subscription. I then used the MeasuringWorth purchasing power calculator to control for the changing relative value of British currency over this period using a real price index, converting each donation amount to 1850£.¹⁶ This resulted in a list of 4,138 total donations made by 1,140 subscribers, amounting to £5,255.¹⁷ This dataset is publicly available.¹⁸ I then plotted the data to visualize relative fluctuations in income over time as well as relationships between income and length of membership (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). There are several years missing from this dataset, either because annual reports are not available or because the APS did not release information for particular years. However, there are enough datapoints to indicate clear trends across the period as a whole.

I cross-referenced the names in my database with entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) and positively identified entries for 62 of the 736 APS donors who were listed with their full names (see Table 1). We cannot assume these 62 individuals to be entirely representative of the APS's 1,140 members, given that the ODNB is inherently biased toward the wealthy and the male. Indeed, whereas 22 percent of the APS's overall membership were listed under Miss, Mrs, or a woman's name, only 3 percent of the ODNB entries were female. Nevertheless, the ODNB entries are useful for building a profile of some APS members. Forty-eight of the entries provide a religious affiliation: 40 percent were Anglican and 29 percent were Quaker. Twenty out of twenty-four entries that identified

¹⁶ "Purchasing Power of British Pounds from 1270 to Present," MeasuringWorth, <https://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/>.

¹⁷ This monetary figure must be used with caution, as there are many methods of measuring historical values. I used a real price index, but a real wage index would have resulted in a figure nearly ten times higher. Yet the point of converting donations to 1850£ was to standardize donation values in order to visualize relative fluctuations in income over time, as well as to visualize relationships between income and length of membership. These relative fluctuations remain identical whether measured by a price index or a wage index.

¹⁸ Darren Reid, "Aborigines Protection Society Subscription Data, 1840–1873.xlsx," University College London, 31 May 2023, <https://doi.org/10.5522/04/23231429.v1>.

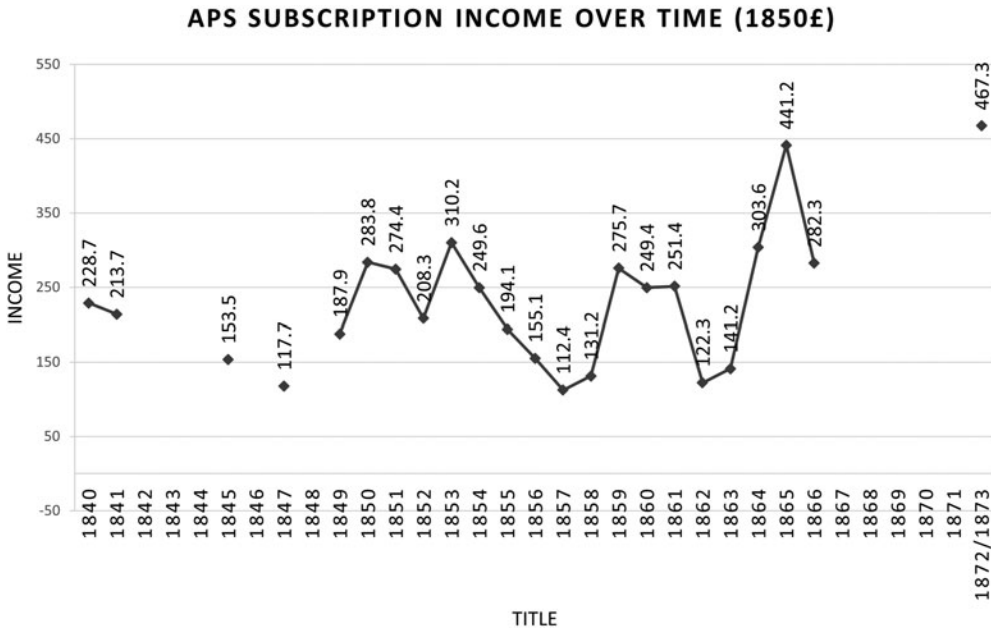


Figure 2. APS subscription income over time from 1840–72/73, in 1850£. See Appendix 2 for sources included in the analysis.

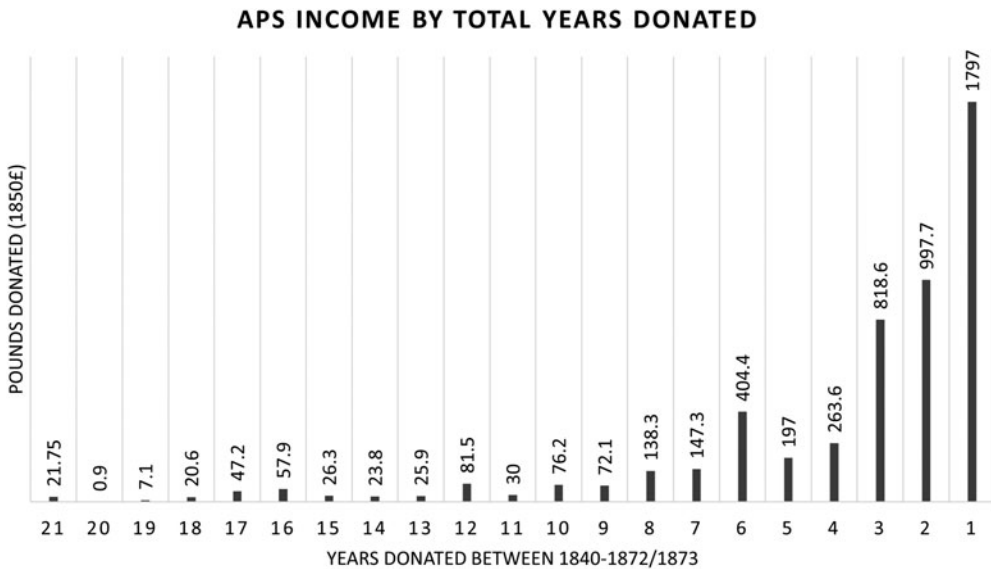


Figure 3. APS income by total years donated between 1840–72/73, in 1850£, ranging from people who donated 21 times to people who only donated once. See Appendix 2 for sources included in the analysis.

a political affiliation were Liberals. Of the sixty-one entries mentioning occupation, the top categories were industrialists (30 percent), physicians (13 percent), lawyers (10 percent), and scholars (10 percent). Of the entries, 55 percent listed parallel philanthropic interests such as prison reform, temperance, and anti-slavery. In addition, 29 percent explicitly mentioned colonial interests such as investment in colonial industries, family members living in the colonies, or direct personal experience of living or working in the colonies. Such data align with

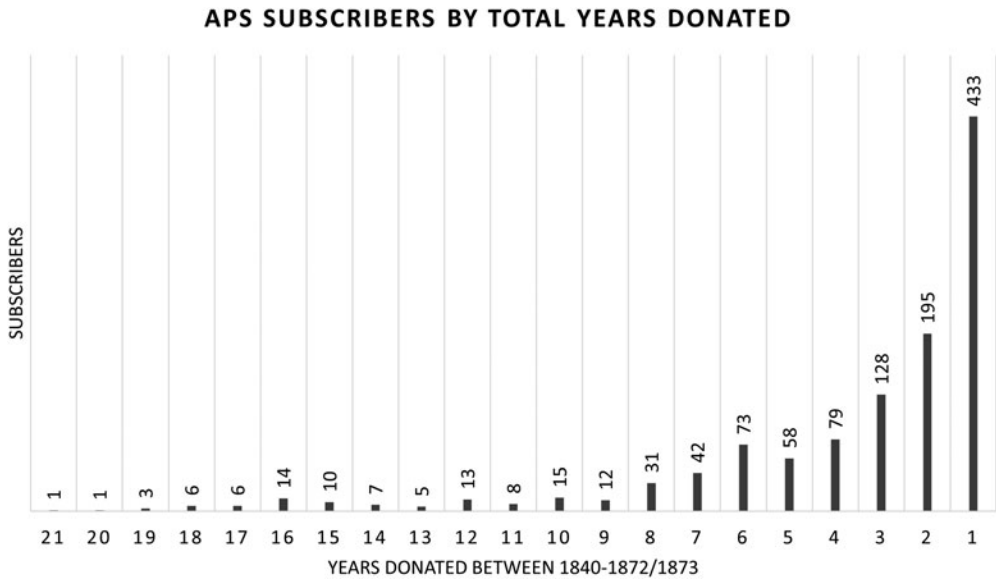


Figure 4. APS subscribers by total years donated between 1840–72/73, ranging from people who donated 21 times to people who only donated once. See Appendix 2 for sources included in the analysis.

existing research emphasizing the predominantly Liberal, Quaker/Evangelical, and industrialist nature of imperial humanitarians.¹⁹

These quantitative and prosopographical data provide a snapshot of how many APS members there were, who they were, and when they joined, but they do not provide any insight into *why* they joined. To answer that question, I collated the speeches made by subscribers at all APS annual meetings between 1840–73 into my database. I cross-referenced these speeches with subscription records to eliminate those made by people who had subscribed for over 10 years, as well as organizers such as Thomas Hodgkin, Thomas Fowell Buxton, and Robert Fowler. This minority were the Society’s core members rather than the peripheral donors whose fluctuating commitment to this cause lies at the heart of this study. In addition, I excluded missionary speeches, given that these individuals tended to live in the colonies and thus had different experiences and motivations to metropolitan humanitarians. This resulted in a collection of 62 speeches that I coded thematically using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software to assess what it was about Indigenous rights activism that APS members claimed to value and how they perceived the lives of distant Indigenous peoples to be relevant to their own (see Table 2). Richard Huzzey adopted a similar methodology when using speeches from the public meetings of the Anti-Slavery Society to assess popular attitudes toward anti-slavery activism.²⁰ Recognizing that these speeches do not reflect the entire range of possible attitudes toward anti-slavery, Huzzey asserts that they nevertheless allow “a glimpse at which meanings were contested and which uncontested.”²¹ Similarly, I use thematic coding to indicate the major points of discussion around the APS’s social value, acknowledging that these cannot encapsulate the full range of attitudes or motivations.

To place the ideas that circulated among the APS membership within the context of larger public discourse about Indigenous rights, I used the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* to build

¹⁹ For a very similar prosopographical breakdown of the Congo Reform Association, see Dean Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism and the Congo Reform Movement, 1896–1913* (London, 2015), 103–29.

²⁰ Richard Huzzey, “Minding Civilisation and Humanity in 1867: A Case Study in British Imperial Culture and Victorian Anti-Slavery,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (2012): 807–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2012.730835>.

²¹ Huzzey, “Minding Civilization and Humanity in 1867,” 809.

Table 1. Prosopographical details of APS members cross-referenced with the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (see Appendix 1 for sources included in analysis)

Category	Count (% of cohort)
<i>Religious affiliation</i>	
Anglican	19 (39%)
Quaker	14 (29%)
Nonconformist (non-Quaker)	12 (25%)
Catholic	3 (6%)
Jewish	1 (2%)
<i>Political affiliation</i>	
Liberal	20 (83%)
Conservative	4 (17%)
<i>Occupation</i>	
Industrialist	18 (30%)
Physician	8 (13%)
Lawyer	6 (10%)
Scholar	6 (10%)
Writer	5 (8%)
Colonial administrator	4 (7%)
Clergy	3 (5%)
Soldier	3 (5%)
Campaigner	2 (3%)
Politician	2 (3%)
Explorer	2 (3%)
Artist	1 (2%)
Civil servant	1 (2%)

a database of 375 articles published in British newspapers that mention the Aborigines' Protection Society between 1840–73. I excluded those that contained only a passing reference to the APS, retaining 53 articles that expressed a clear opinion about the organization. These I coded in Nvivo to identify whether the APS was represented positively or negatively, recording the reasons for the assessment (see Table 3). I then plotted the ratios of positive to negative representations to trace changing public discourse outside of APS annual meetings (Figure 6). Douglas Lorimer has persuasively argued that newspaper discourse cannot be relied upon to assess attitudes toward Indigenous peoples given that “the press, indulging in sensationalism to arouse readers’ interest, gives an exaggerated, distorted view of racial attitudes.”²² I use these newspapers, therefore, not as direct evidence of public attitudes toward the APS, but instead to expand the range of possible readings of APS involvement beyond those articulated at its annual meetings and within member correspondence.

APS Membership in the Mid-Victorian Period

Historians agree that the Aborigines' Protection Society of the mid-nineteenth century was small and underfunded.²³ However, the membership and income data represented in Figures 1 and 2 also demonstrate that this simplistic narrative fails to capture substantial fluctuations

²² Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class, and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester, 1978), 18.

²³ Willmington, “The Activities of the Aborigines Protection Society,” 24–28; Swaisland, “The Aborigines Protection Society,” 15–20; Heartfield, *The Aborigines' Protection Society*, 28; Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism*, 22–23.

Table 2. Rhetoric used in support of the APS in annual meeting speeches (see Appendix 2 for sources included in analysis)

Idea	Code count	Year, speaker	
APS prevents colonial warfare	18	1850, A. W. Hanson 1850, F. Tuckett 1851, J. J. Freeman 1852, John Burnet 1853, Oswald Brierly 1853, John Burnet 1853, C. B. Gribble 1853, S. Norman 1858, Richard Birt 1858, Henry Richard	1858, Washington Wilks 1860, S. J. Abington 1861, Edwin Tregelles 1862, George Pritchard 1863, Justin McCarthy 1864, Charles Hadfield 1865, Alfred Churchill 1866, W. T. McCullagh Torrens
APS ameliorates shame of British behaviour	10	1853, Joseph Sturge 1857, Henry Richard 1859, Henry Richard 1862, W. H. Bonner 1862, Fielding Thorpe 1862, Joseph Thorpe	1866, W. T. McCullagh Torrens 1867, Dr Pope 1867, Richard Moore 1873, Mr McArthur
APS protects Indigenous rights as equal British subjects	6	1840, Mr Bowring 1841, W. S. O'Brien 1857, C. Nicolay	1862, Mr Kelly 1866, J. H. Patterson 1873, Mr Jenkins
APS benefits domestic political economy	3	1860, Dr MacGowan 1871, Humphry Sandwith 1872, Arthur Arnold	

in the APS's finances over time. As can be seen, the APS's membership and income levels actually rose and fell in three distinct waves. The first is only apparent in the income data that indicate rapid growth, starting around 1850 and peaking in 1853, before falling back to mid-1840s levels in 1857. The opposite trend appears in the membership data that show continual decline between 1845–57. However, the next two waves demonstrate agreement across membership and income data, exposing massive upward shifts in the APS's membership, lasting from 1859–61 and then from 1864 onward. It is unclear, due to lack of data between 1866–72, at what point this third wave ended. Nevertheless, APS membership grew between 1864–66.

These fluctuations indicate that the APS's membership was made up of a wide range of people who were successfully convinced at certain points in time that the APS was worthy of their support, but were not concerned enough about Indigenous rights to be long-term members. The APS's reliance on many short-term donors is further reinforced by Figures 3 and 4 that visualize the relationship between length of subscriber commitment and level of APS support. Figure 4 reveals that the majority of members (628) only subscribed for one or two years, while a minority (89) subscribed for ten years or more. This suggests that there was a core group of around 89 people who supported the APS throughout the entire period, with the remaining 1,051 subscribers coming and going in response to fleeting moments of overlap between their own personal interests and the APS's agenda. Those 89 core subscribers were fundamental to the continuation of the APS, keeping it going between waves of transient one- and two-time supporters: they alone contributed 8 percent (£419) of the APS's overall income. Yet the 1,051 transient subscribers, contributing 92 percent (£4,836) of the overall income, were even more financially indispensable. The importance of these

Table 3. Most common critiques of the APS in newspaper articles (see Appendix 3 for sources included in analysis)

Idea	Code count	Year, Publication
APS spreads insolence and stokes rebellion	14	1851, <i>John Bull</i> 1851, <i>The Times</i> (2) 1864, <i>Morning Post</i> 1865, <i>Morning Post</i> 1865, <i>Pall Mall Gazette</i> (4) 1865, <i>The Times</i> (3) 1869, <i>Standard</i> 1869, <i>The Times</i>
APS misunderstands colonial life	9	1851, <i>Morning Chronicle</i> 1851, <i>The Times</i> 1857, <i>Illustrated Times</i> 1857, <i>Morning Post</i> 1857, <i>Daily Telegraph</i> 1860, <i>Morning Chronicle</i> 1866, <i>Morning Post</i> 1866, <i>Standard</i>
APS stands in the way of colonization	4	1865, <i>Examiner</i> 1865, <i>Pall Mall Gazette</i> 1865, <i>The Times</i> (2)
APS are race traitors	3	1858, <i>Daily Telegraph</i> 1858, <i>Illustrated Times</i> 1865, <i>Pall Mall Gazette</i>

transient donors to the continuation of the APS, and their significant fluctuations over time, indicate that there was no singular idea or event that brought these donors together. Rather, it appears that Victorian Indigenous rights activism responded to a range of events and ideas that attracted different groups of people at different points in time.

Interestingly, the clustering of peaks and valleys in APS membership around specific events like the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the Morant Bay Uprising of 1865 indicate that membership levels correlated with the same imperial crises that historians have traditionally used to support the “humanitarian decline” thesis. In her 1971 monograph *Victorian Attitudes to Race*, Christine Bolt argued that these crises shattered British expectations of the “improvability” of foreign peoples. The Indian Mutiny seemingly demonstrated “the gross ingratitude on the part of the Indian people” regarding the benefits of European civilization. Conversely, the Morant Bay Uprising allegedly revealed the inability of Afro-Caribbean people to utilize their limited political rights effectively.²⁴ By tracing racialized discourses about imperial philanthropy in British newspapers during and after these crises, Bolt argues that “the abolitionist and missionary attempt to demonstrate the essential equality of all men before God seemed disproved,” that even “genuine friends of the Negro admitted doubts,” and consequently that “in the Britain of 1865 philanthropy in general, and missionary work in particular, were unfashionable.”²⁵ Catherine Hall’s 2002 *Civilising Subjects* revived this narrative for new imperial historians. Through an analysis of newspaper articles and, in particular, Thomas Carlyle’s “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question,” Hall points to humanitarian despair at the

²⁴ Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London, 1971), 157, 86–92.

²⁵ Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race*, 92, 95.

Indian Mutiny and at poor economic prospects in Jamaica as evidence that “by the late 1850s even the most optimistic of anti-slavery supporters were discouraged.”²⁶

This decline thesis has become entrenched in British imperial historiography. It has been used to contextualize a wide range of historical developments, ranging from Britain’s cession of self-government to settler colonies, to the rise of informal models of imperialism in Africa and Southeast Asia.²⁷ It has also informed historiographical understandings of the APS’s low membership in the mid-nineteenth century. Most recently, Zoë Laidlaw argues that “the public turned against ‘telescopic philanthropy’” largely as a result of intensifying “racialization and fear of the colonized ‘other’” following the imperial crises of the 1850s and 1860s. In this period, Laidlaw posits, “it became harder for British-based humanitarians to persuade fellow Britons that non-white imperial subjects were worthy of attention.”²⁸ How, then, can we reconcile declining humanitarian sentiment in Britain with the fact that the APS’s membership and income levels trended upward in 1850–56, 1859–61, and 1864–66?

Internal APS hiring decisions and publicity policies played some role in its fluctuating membership levels. For example, the Society hired a travelling agent named Samuel Abington between 1860 and 1863, and this undoubtedly contributed to the expanded membership of those years. However, no travelling agent was employed for the rest of this period, including during the income expansion in 1850–53 and the membership and income spike in 1864–66. As such, the travelling agent alone cannot explain fluctuations in the APS’s membership. Frederick Chesson’s employment, first as assistant secretary in 1855 and then as secretary in 1857, similarly played an important role in keeping the APS visible. Like Thomas Hodgkin before him, Chesson was a tireless letter-writer for the cause, publishing over 120 letters to the editor in the decades between 1860–90 on behalf of the APS. Yet his tenure at the APS between 1855–88 does not correlate with fluctuations in APS membership that was falling at the time of his hiring and did not recover for nearly four years afterwards. Thus, while the work of committed individuals was important in keeping the APS relevant, contemporary events, including those imperial crises that have formed the basis of the humanitarian decline thesis, proved critical.

Each peak in APS membership coincided with imperial crises of the very kind that the decline thesis holds should have resulted in decreased commitment to the organization. The first wave corresponded with the Eighth Xhosa War (1850–53) in the Cape Colony. The longest and most devastating of the nine Cape frontier wars, the Eighth Xhosa War was a consequence of rampant dispossession of Indigenous people from their territory. Cape Governor Harry Smith relocated thousands of Xhosa eastwards to make room for further settlement. Uniting various Xhosa nations into a multi-ethnic rebellion against colonization, it resulted in terrible atrocities on both sides, with 1,600 British casualties, 16,000 Xhosa casualties, and the catastrophic defeat of the Ciskei Xhosa.²⁹ The second wave of APS support followed quickly on the heels of the Indian Mutiny and also directly corresponded with the First Taranaki War (1860–1861), sparked by New Zealand Governor Thomas Gore Browne’s decision to buy a parcel of land without the consent of the many Māori stakeholders with overlapping rights to that territory. Browne used military force to defend his purchase, leading to a year of indecisive warfare between settlers and Māori. The third wave of APS support corresponded not only with the Morant Bay Uprising, but also with the Second Taranaki War (1863–1866), a resurgence of conflict sparked by the New Zealand government’s new policy of confiscating land allegedly belonging to “rebels” that resulted in the loss of over a million acres of Māori territory.³⁰

²⁶ Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects* (Chicago, 2002), 358.

²⁷ Mantena, *Alibis of Empire*, 1–20.

²⁸ Laidlaw, *Protecting the Empire’s Humanity*, 1, 100.

²⁹ John Laband, *The Land Wars: The Dispossession of the Khoisan and AmaXhosa in the Cape Colony* (Cape Town, 2020).

³⁰ James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland, 1986).

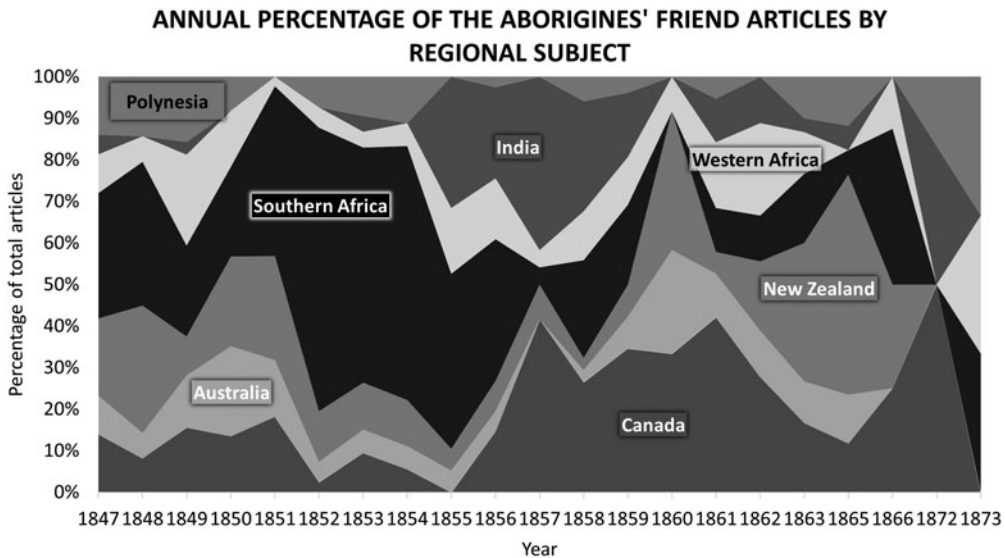


Figure 5. Annual percentage of *The Aborigines' Friend* articles by regional subject. See Appendix 4 for sources included in the analysis.

These conflicts dominated APS publications during each of the three waves of increased popularity. Figure 5 visualizes the percentage of articles in the APS's periodical *The Aborigines' Friend*, written about the various parts of the colonial empire. Southern Africa was by far the most discussed topic during the 1850–56 wave, comprising between 40–70 percent of all articles. New Zealand tied Canada as the most discussed topic during the 1859–61 wave, yet its massive spike from around 5 percent of articles in 1859 to around 45 percent of articles in 1860 shows that New Zealand was the most trending topic during the period. During the 1864–66 wave, New Zealand again spiked from just over 10 percent of articles in 1862 to around 50 percent of articles in 1865.

The impact of these external events on APS membership cannot be entirely separated from internal APS decisions to capitalize on crises to capture public interest. For instance, the APS's executive committee made the strategic decision to dedicate more than 20 percent of *The Aborigines' Friend* to India between 1855–57 after almost no coverage of Indian affairs in the preceding fifteen years. Chesson also helped found the Jamaica Committee that lobbied very publicly to prosecute Governor Edward Eyre for his violent suppression of the Morant Bay Uprising.³¹ Both actions contributed to the spikes in APS membership around those periods. However, although the APS's executive committee tirelessly advocated for and publicized the APS during the entire period between 1840–73, it was only around three particular moments of imperial crisis that APS membership spiked upward. APS executive actions and imperial crises were thus contingent and co-productive factors in the production of support for the APS. If imperial crises instilled anxieties about the future of the empire, joining the APS provided a means of alleviating those anxieties.

The relationship among imperial crises, APS publications about those crises, and rising APS membership and income make it tempting to conclude that the humanitarian decline thesis is untenable. Newspaper coverage of the APS nevertheless corroborates the decline thesis. There were fifty-three articles published between 1840–73 that articulated a clear negative or positive stance toward the APS. Figure 6 visualizes these articles over time,

³¹ Laidlaw, "Justice to India—Prosperity to England—Freedom to the Slave!," 322–23; Heartfield, *The Aborigines Protection Society*, 56–57.

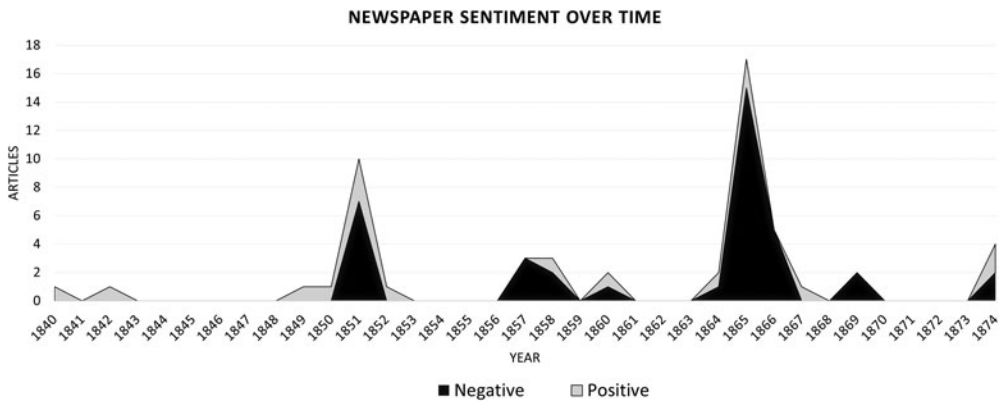


Figure 6. Negative versus positive representations of the APS in newspapers between 1840–74. See Appendix 3 for sources included in the analysis.

and a familiar pattern is immediately recognizable. Newspaper coverage of the APS rose and fell in waves around the same moments as APS membership and income levels, with a medium spike of ten articles in 1851, a small spike of around three articles per year between 1856–1860, and a large spike of seventeen articles in 1865. This shows that the APS’s membership was rising and falling in line with its level of publicity in the press. However, the majority of these articles (37 out of 53) were negative, thus supporting the argument that the British print media hardened against humanitarianism during times of imperial crisis.³² It appears, therefore, that metropolitan observation of imperial crises such as the Eighth Xhosa War, the Indian Mutiny, the First and Second Taranaki wars, and the Morant Bay Uprising *both* hardened public opinion against the APS *and* increased the APS’s membership and income levels.

The key to understanding this paradox is to account for newspaper political bias. Hugh Cunningham argues that Victorian critiques of philanthropy in general tended to come from Tory newspapers.³³ Indeed, all but two of the 37 negative articles about the APS were published in Tory papers, mostly in *The Times*, the *Morning Post*, and the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Whig/Radical newspapers were much more likely to be positive than Tory newspapers, although these papers were also less likely to take any strong stance at all. Only nine articles with a clear stance on the APS appeared in Whig/Radical newspapers such as the *Daily News*, the *Morning Chronicle*, and the *Examiner*, but the majority of these (six) were positive. Conversely, forty-four articles with a clear stance appeared in Tory newspapers such as *The Times*, the *Standard*, the *Morning Post*, and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and the majority of these (thirty-two) were negative. This suggests that the spikes in negative newspaper attitudes toward the APS do not reflect an overall humanitarian decline. Instead, there was a polarization of opinion between Tories hostile to the APS and Whigs/Radicals supportive of it.

To some extent, this polarization in the media produced ideological echo chambers. Critics of the APS could always find their views reinforced in Conservative papers such as *The Times*, while APS donors could rally around Liberal papers such as the *Daily News*. But Conservatives and Liberals also read each other’s papers, and exposure to opposing views could lead to further polarization. For example, when an APS supporter named Agnes Craig read newspaper discourse dismissive of the rights of Indigenous peoples, she interpreted it as “a specimen of the insolent spirit deepening and widening in this country,” and expressed shame at her own nation for “becoming a mere machine for extorting

³² Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race*, 75–108; Hall, *Civilizing Subjects*, 338–79; Lorimer, *Colour, Class, and the Victorians*, 113–29.

³³ Cunningham, *The Reputation of Philanthropy since 1750*, 124.

amid such hypocrisy of religious and political professions.”³⁴ Her disdain at Britain’s growing spirit of “insolence” illustrates the ways in which observations of declining humanitarian sentiment pushed her to respond with humanitarian entrenchment. Attending to differences between Tory and Whig/Radical discourses around the APS helps explain why its membership continued to increase in the face of hardening attitudes to humanitarian projects. The fact that 20 out of the 24 ODNB entries of APS members that mention political ideology indicate affiliations with the Liberal Party provides further evidence of this. However, statistics and prosopography cannot provide insight into the terms of this divergence. To understand how APS members reconciled the entrenchment of their humanitarian sentiment in the face of mounting evidence contrary to the humanitarian project, we must look to the rhetoric APS members used to explicate the value they perceived in the society.

The Appeal of the APS to its Rank-and-File Members

Historians of nineteenth-century anti-slavery and famine relief have exposed how metropolitan Britons connected humanitarian ideas with domestic interests and values, suggesting that concern for foreign peoples was often bound up in promoting and justifying imperial economic and political policies.³⁵ Similarly, historians of the settler colonies have long pointed to the ways humanitarian discourses were deployed to justify their cases for self-government, to defend their access to imperial resources when jeopardized by critiques from anti-slavery advocates at Exeter Hall, and to establish control over Indigenous land and labor.³⁶ As Laidlaw has illustrated, settler lobbyists such as Standish Motte, Montague Hawtrey, and George Fife Angus “infiltrated” the APS’s committee to gain humanitarian support for systematic colonization companies.³⁷ Colonial sojourners, including the Bannister brothers (Saxe, John William, and Timothy), traversed the colonies in a quest to rejuvenate their family’s flailing fortunes, using humanitarian critiques of settler practices to establish their own credentials as colonial experts in order to obtain valuable land, trading deals, and posts in colonial administration.³⁸ Indigenous peoples also regularly leveraged humanitarian discourses and networks for diverse political goals, ranging from enfranchisement and land ownership to self-determination.³⁹ Yet there has been no assessment of metropolitan interests in Indigenous rights activism beyond “core” APS members like Thomas Hodgkin and the Buxton family.

Speeches made at APS annual meetings (see Table 2) reveal that the most common value its rank-and-file members placed upon the APS, evoked by eighteen individuals, was that it protected friends and family in the colonies by preventing colonial violence and warfare. Frederick Tuckett, a civil engineer who had worked for the New Zealand Company between 1841–46, explained at the APS’s 1850 annual meeting that “the Society had strong claims upon his consideration” because treating Indigenous peoples on a “footing of equality with their fellow-men” was the only way to prevent a calamitous crisis in New Zealand.⁴⁰

³⁴ Agnes Craig to Frederick Chesson, 23 March 1861, MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 18 / C129-142, Bodleian Libraries (BL).

³⁵ Major, “British Humanitarian Political Economy;” Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*; Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 26–27.

³⁶ Alan Lester, “British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 54 (2002): 24–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/54.1.24>; Kenton Storey, *Settler Anxiety at the Outposts of Empire: Colonial Relations, Humanitarian Discourses, and the Imperial Press* (Vancouver, 2016); Sam Hutchinson, *Settlers, War, and Empire in the Press: Unsettling News in Australia and Britain, 1863–1902* (Cham, 2018).

³⁷ Laidlaw, *Protecting the Empire’s Humanity*, 187–229.

³⁸ Elbourne, *Empire, Kinship and Violence*.

³⁹ Amanda Nettelbeck, “‘We Are Sure of Your Sympathy’: Indigenous Uses of the Politics of Protection in Nineteenth-Century Australia and Canada,” *Journal of Colonialism & Colonial History* 17, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2016.0009>; Reid, “The Aborigines’ Protection Society as an Anticolonial Network;” Reid, “Shadrach Boyce Mama and the ‘Kaffir Depot’.”

⁴⁰ “The Annual Meeting,” *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Aborigines’ Protection Society* (London, 1850), 13.

Tuckett believed that the only reason why there had so far been no major conflict in New Zealand was because Governor Sir George Grey was “conscientious” about Māori rights. He “dreaded” the “calamity” that might yet ensue should the British government begin “treating the Aborigines as so much mentally or morally our inferiors.”⁴¹ In 1853, Oswald Brierly, a naval painter who had visited the Torres Strait aboard HMS *Rattlesnake*, similarly voiced his apprehension after his companion aboard ship, a surveyor named Kennedy, was killed while leading an expedition in northeastern Queensland. The official narrative of Kennedy’s death was that “a tribe of natives with whom they had had some apparently friendly intercourse, tempted by their forlorn condition and a savage thirst for plunder, attacked them in a scrub and with too fatal success.”⁴² But Brierly had investigated Kennedy’s death and found that “a woman had been shot without cause by the whites, and they were naturally revenging her death.”⁴³ Brierly asserted that colonial violence was “always in consequence of provocation.”⁴⁴ Treating Indigenous peoples justly, he implied, was the only way to prevent more bloodshed.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of the idea that the APS prevented colonial violence came from Charles Hadfield, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Army Service Corps (a logistics office based in Woolwich), whose brother, Octavius, was an Archdeacon in the New Zealand church. Hadfield believed that the First Taranaki War was an instance of “justly retributive evil” that could have been avoided by dealing fairly with the Māori. He lamented that “we are verily guilty of the blood of our New Zealand brethren.”⁴⁵ Acting justly toward Indigenous peoples was not actually about respecting Indigenous rights, he implied, but rather about saving British lives, including his brother’s, that were put at risk by colonial warfare. At the 1850 annual meeting, one APS supporter went so far as to suggest that the APS should market itself as a protector of emigrants rather than Indigenous peoples. “The operations of the Society ought to be viewed in another light,” he argued. “In every parish of the United Kingdom there were families who had connexions in the Colonies. To all of these the Society was doing benevolent services.”⁴⁶ Thus, just as Antoinette Burton argues that imperial insurgencies prompted overseas investors to push for stronger imperial governance to protect their material interests, so too did such insurgencies push Britons into calling for imperial reforms.⁴⁷ In the case of Indigenous rights activism, the demanded reforms revolved around fairer rather than stricter policies. The material interests to be protected were not only investments and markets, but also friends and family.

Preventing colonial warfare was also the most common justification for denigrating the APS in the British press (see [Table 3](#) below). Sixteen of the thirty-seven negative press articles about the APS argued that humanitarianism caused colonial warfare: being too soft on Indigenous peoples made them think that Britain was weak, thereby inviting resistance and rebellion. For example, in response to the Eighth Xhosa War (1850–53) in South Africa, *The Times* attacked the APS for promoting a light-handed frontier policy that “instead of conciliating and civilizing the frontier tribes, rendered them intolerably presumptuous and insolent.”⁴⁸ Other arguments claimed that by criticizing settler practices, the APS only encouraged Indigenous nations to think of themselves as a wronged party and to blame Britain for all its problems. The *Pall Mall Gazette* made such an argument during the Second Taranaki War (1863–66), writing that the APS’s “chief object seems to be to

⁴¹ “The Annual Meeting,” *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 13.

⁴² John MacGillivray et al., *Narrative of the Voyage of H. M. S. Rattlesnake, Commanded by the Late Captain Owen Stanley ... during the Years 1846–50 ... To Which Is Added Mr. E. B. Kennedy’s Expedition for the Exploration of the Cape York Peninsula* (London, 1852), 1: 164.

⁴³ “The Annual Meeting,” *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Aborigines’ Protection Society* (London, 1853), 14.

⁴⁴ “The Annual Meeting,” *Sixteenth Annual Report*, 14.

⁴⁵ “The Annual Meeting,” *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Aborigines Protection Society* (London, 1864), 24–25.

⁴⁶ “The Annual Meeting,” *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 11–12.

⁴⁷ Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford, 2015), 145–215.

⁴⁸ “[Leader] Although we plead guilty...,” *The Times*, 24 November 1851.

encourage the Maories in their hatred toward the English settlers, and to persuade them neither to sell nor let any more land to Englishmen.”⁴⁹ Such rhetoric indicates that while some metropolitans valued the APS for protecting friends and family members in the colonies, others attacked the APS for placing fellow Britons in danger.

Historians of the British empire have underscored the importance of family and kinship connections to the operation of British imperialism; thus it is not surprising that rhetoric about the value of the APS centered around friends, family, and expatriates. Laura Ishiguro argues that the transnational relationships between metropole and colony sustained by familial correspondence “played an active role in building and sustaining a global empire” by normalizing and erasing the violence of settler colonialism and rewriting the colonies as “a banal, liveable, and sustainable home.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Elizabeth Elbourne argues for the importance of “family biopower” to the operation of settler colonialism. Elbourne demonstrates that as the three Bannisters roamed through the colonies in search of high-paying positions that could rebuild their family’s failing fortune, they were assisted by family not only through “supporting one another in their colonial enterprises and transferring ‘expertise’ from one context to another,” but also through the labor of their sister Elizabeth Ruth, who lobbied government officials for lucrative postings on their behalf.⁵¹ In this sense, family connections knitted metropole and colonies together so that family members of emigrants became actively involved in colonization, despite never leaving home. While Ishiguro and Elbourne contend that familial connections facilitated the erasure of settler colonial violence and the economic maintenance of colonial fortune-seekers, respectively, family connections also facilitated vocal opposition to settler colonial violence.

There is some indication that the APS’s promise of reducing colonial warfare was used to support imperial economic and political policies in a similar way to those in anti-slavery and famine relief circles. For example, one APS supporter at the 1860 annual meeting maintained that preventing colonial warfare was in Britain’s “material interests” because it would “render unnecessary many of those costly expeditions” sent to quell local uprisings.⁵² This argument was clearly influenced by critics of British imperial expansion who claimed that the economic costs of acquiring, holding, and defending colonies exceeded whatever benefits accrued from their ownership.⁵³ These types of arguments about the prevention of warfare were a hallmark of free trade advocacy. Anti-Corn Law activist Richard Cobden had argued that free trade would put an end to warfare by making countries interdependent and stripping power from warmongering governments.⁵⁴ This rhetoric was nevertheless rare within APS speeches, despite the ways in which commerce and humanitarianism were blended within missionary, anti-slavery, and famine relief circles. Indeed, Indigenous rights activism was frequently detrimental to the interests of political economy, given that respecting Indigenous land and labor rights would have made it harder to obtain cheap land and labor. This does not mean that political economy played no role in Indigenous rights activism. Nevertheless, the marginality of such concerns within APS speeches, in contrast to their centrality in other humanitarian arenas, does suggest that political economy was less ingrained in metropolitan approaches to Indigenous rights activism.

The second most common value its membership placed upon the APS, evoked ten times between 1840–73, was the prevention of British peoples’ moral degeneration. Some APS supporters explicated this in terms of the moral degeneration experienced by friends and family

⁴⁹ “Philanthropic Incendiarism,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 September 1865.

⁵⁰ Laura Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write Home about: British Family Correspondence and the Settler Colonial Everyday in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 2019), 12–28.

⁵¹ Elbourne, *Empire, Kinship and Violence*, 187–88, 270–304.

⁵² “The Annual Meeting,” *Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Aborigines Protection Society* (London, 1860), 23.

⁵³ Peter J. Cain, “Bentham and the Development of the British Critique of Colonialism,” *Utilitas* 23, no. 1 (2011): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820810000427>.

⁵⁴ Anthony Howe, “Liberals, Free Trade and Europe: from Cobden to the Common Market,” *Journal of Liberal History* 98 (2018): 4–11, <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/journal-articles/liberals-free-trade-and-europe/>.

when they travelled to the colonies. William Henry Bonner, a Baptist minister in Wolverhampton, attended the 1862 annual meeting to lament the moral degeneration of a friend who had travelled to New Zealand. Bonner had told his friend prior to travelling to “act the part of a Christian woman” toward the Māori, yet discovered that an “evil influence” had exerted itself on her mind while in the colony.⁵⁵ She now spoke very harshly about the Māori, saying that “they want a thorough sound thrashing, for that nothing else will do for them,” and that “there are thousands and thousands of acres of land that they cannot cultivate, and the white people ought to have them.”⁵⁶ Bonner interpreted his friend’s growing disdain for the Māori as evidence of her moral and civilizational degeneration, lamenting that “she speaks more like a heathen than a Christian.”⁵⁷ Bonner’s anxiety about his friend’s moral decline provides further evidence that Indigenous rights activism was more often about the negative impact of colonization on friends and family than about concerns for Indigenous peoples themselves.

In addition to preventing the degeneration of their friends and family, some APS supporters sought to distance themselves from the evil results of their empire’s immorality. This was particularly the case for British politicians who felt personally responsible for failing to contain settler violence. At the 1866 annual meeting, two British Members of Parliament—William McCullagh Torrens of Finsbury and James Bell of Guildford—spoke up to absolve their guilty consciences over the British government’s role in the Second Taranaki War. Torrens declared his “disgust” at the injustice of the war, proclaiming that “none of us were free from the aggregate guilt of the nation in the matter if we did not speak out strongly.”⁵⁸ Torrens admitted feelings of guilt for wrongs that had been conducted in their country’s name. He hoped that by speaking out publicly against those wrongs, his feelings of guilt would be diminished. Torrens’s atonement was personal rather than collective. He displayed no hope that, by making British governance more humanitarian, he would justify Britain’s right to rule or prove British supremacy in relation to international competitors. Instead, Torrens used Indigenous rights activism largely as a tool to assure himself and fellow Britons that they were not responsible for the evils of their empire. This supports similar arguments made by historians of settler colonialism that humanitarian discourses were used to absolve settlers of responsibility for settler violence,⁵⁹ suggesting that such absolution was needed at home as well as in the colonies.

Conversely, other APS supporters were directly concerned about the impact of British moral degeneration on their country’s international standing. Agnes Craig, for instance, directly compared the honor of British and Italian soldiers. Identifying the hypocrisy of “squabbling for prize money among our military after every engagement and still boasting about glory and patriotism,” Craig contrasted this with “the Italians and other nations struggling for liberty! Fancy Garibaldi taking prize money!”⁶⁰ Giuseppe Garibaldi, a prominent figure in the Unification of Italy, was well known in the early 1860s as a symbol of European freedom as well as an opponent of slavery.⁶¹ Craig interpreted the difference between Garibaldi’s famed liberalism and the hypocrisy of British imperial liberalism as evidence of Britain’s declining international reputation.

Craig also applied this logic to comparisons with Russia and Austria, lamenting that “I think the Russians and the Austrians are preferable to our hypocritical sordid ruffians.”⁶²

⁵⁵ “The Annual Meeting,” *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report of the Aborigines Protection Society* (London, 1862), 33–34.

⁵⁶ “The Annual Meeting,” *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report*, 33–34.

⁵⁷ “The Annual Meeting,” *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report*, 33–34.

⁵⁸ “The Annual Meeting,” *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Aborigines Protection Society* (London, 1866), 17–18.

⁵⁹ For examples of this work, see Sara Ahmed, “The Politics of Bad Feeling,” *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal* 1, no. 1 (2005): 72–85; Hutchinson, *Settlers, War, and Empire*; Richard Price, *Empire and Indigeneity: Histories and Legacies* (New York, 2021).

⁶⁰ Craig to Chesson, 23 March 1861, C129-142.

⁶¹ Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven, 2007), 294–305.

⁶² Craig to Chesson, 24 April 1861, MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 18 / C129-147, BL.

This biting comparison between so-called civilized Britons and Russians, typically cast as tyrannical barbarians by the mid-Victorian press,⁶³ was a recurring theme in APS meetings. At the 1859 annual meeting, George Thompson, the famed abolitionist, worried that Britain had placed India under “a despotism more complete and rigorous, than even that of Russia itself.”⁶⁴ During the 1854 annual meeting, James Bell lamented:

[W]e are all very free with our condemnation of Russia...not reflecting that we have appropriated more land, ten times over, that belonged to other people, than she has, during the last century. Those who have appropriated the continent of India, and now lately picked a quarrel with the Burmese, and seized a large part of their territory, have, at least, no right to criticize the acts of the Emperor Nicholas.⁶⁵

Christopher Brown has argued that anti-slavery activism was spurred by concerns about Britain’s international reputation. Similarly, British Indigenous rights activists aspired to respond to the challenge to Britain’s right to rule posed by the Eighth Xhosa War and the Taranaki wars by emphasizing Britain’s benevolent and “improving” governance of its Indigenous subjects. The constant references to Russia support Alan Lester, Kate Boehme, and Peter Mitchell’s argument that “British perceptions and fears of Russian imperial expansion” were “the most significant external driver[s] of British imperial affairs” in the nineteenth century.⁶⁶ But the use of Russian expansion as a foil to critique British treatment of Indigenous peoples also demonstrates the capacity for Indigenous rights discourses to draw on and adapt to a range of diverse mid-Victorian geopolitical anxieties.

Conclusion

Although mid-Victorian Indigenous rights activism did not rival the mass popularity of either the earlier anti-slavery movement or the later Congo reform movement, the Aborigines’ Protection Society continued to attract hundreds of new members over the course of the 1850s and 1860s in relation to ongoing wars and crises in the colonies. Reflecting rising racialization and declining faith in civilizing missions, these mid-Victorian Indigenous rights activists described their humanitarianism in terms that were less about Indigenous peoples themselves and more about the impact of “native rebellions” on friends and family in the colonies and the toll that dishonorable “native polices” were having on Britain’s international standing.

These findings provide useful insights into several conceptual debates in the historiography of imperial humanitarianism. They problematize historians’ division of humanitarian activity into modes, which Michael Barnett terms “alchemical” and “emergency,” that, he claims, occupied distinct, non-overlapping spheres.⁶⁷ According to Barnett, alchemical humanitarianism was characterized by broad reformatory projects, such as Christian missionary movements, that aimed to remove the root causes of suffering by remaking societies along different political, social, or cultural lines. Conversely, emergency humanitarianism, sometimes termed ad hoc humanitarianism,⁶⁸ generated narrow projects intended only to

⁶³ Clifford Longley, *Chosen People: The Big Idea that Shaped England and America* (London, 2002), 192; Iwona Sakowicz, “Russia and the Russians: Opinions of the British Press during the Reign of Alexander II (Dailies and Weeklies),” *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 3 (2005): 271–82, at 280, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244105055103>.

⁶⁴ “Annual Meeting,” *Annual Report of the Aborigines’ Protection Society, Twenty-Second Anniversary, May, 1859* (London, 1859), 18.

⁶⁵ “Annual Meeting,” *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Aborigines’ Protection Society* (London, 1854), 17.

⁶⁶ Alan Lester, Kate Boehme, and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge, 2021), 6.

⁶⁷ Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, 2011), 10–11.

⁶⁸ Norbert Götz, Georgina Brewis, and Steffen Werther, *Humanitarianism in the Modern World: The Moral Economy of Famine Relief* (Cambridge, 2020), 28.

reduce suffering that emerged in response to specific and temporally bounded events such as wartime relief.⁶⁹

The Aborigines' Protection Society might at first seem to be easily classified as an alchemical humanitarian organization as it sought to improve Indigenous welfare by remaking colonial society to assimilate Indigenous peoples more effectively into European culture, to police settler violence, and to legislate around Indigenous peoples' land, labor, and political rights more extensively. Yet the APS also possessed aspects of emergency humanitarianism, given that the bulk of its supporters came and went in response to specific imperial crises. The APS's organizers had a central governing mission that persevered throughout the nineteenth century. But it could not have survived without the donations of those fleeting supporters who were only convinced of the Society's importance in moments of imperial crisis. This suggests that humanitarian campaigns are more productively understood as entailing a combination of central alchemical principles and external emergency pressures.

The complexity of the APS's membership base also challenges the widely perceived dichotomy between metropolitan Indigenous rights activists as earnestly altruistic and settler Indigenous rights activists as cynically self-interested. Kenton Storey differentiates between a "rhetorical humanitarianism" that was designed in the colonies "to promote the interests of the colonists" and an "evangelical humanitarianism" developed by metropolitan missionaries and "driven by a commitment to protect all Indigenous peoples."⁷⁰ Barnett has similarly argued that metropolitan missionaries "believed in the unity of humankind and wanted to emancipate the local populations," while settlers "placed power and profits above Christianity."⁷¹ This division has been deployed by historians to support the argument that the meaning of humanitarianism shifted with the establishment of responsible government in the settler colonies, with settlers manipulating imperial humanitarian discourses to justify their control over Indigenous peoples.⁷² This is a persuasive argument. However, by adhering to this categorization of metropolitans (largely missionaries) as good humanitarians and settlers as bad humanitarians, historians have constructed an overly simplistic narrative of the degeneration of Indigenous rights activism as it descended from the moral high ground of the metropole to become corrupted by settler colonialism. By moving beyond the assumption that metropolitan Indigenous rights activism was only about moral atonement or improving the lives of Indigenous peoples, and instead recognizing that it could also be about concerns such as the safety of colonists and the reputation of the British empire, historians can expose the continuities between settler and imperial humanitarianisms and better understand the relationship between humanitarian disillusionment and humanitarian activism.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021937124000017>

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⁶⁹ Norbert Götz, "Rationales of Humanitarianism: The Case of British Relief to Germany, 1805–1815," *Journal of Modern European History* 12, no. 2 (2014): 186–99, https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944_2014_2_186.

⁷⁰ Storey, *Settler Anxiety at the Outposts of Empire*, 21.

⁷¹ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 67.

⁷² See Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, *Taking Liberty: Indigenous Rights and Settler Self-Government in Colonial Australia, 1830–1890* (Cambridge, 2018); Price, *Empire and Indigeneity*; Amanda Nettelbeck, *Indigenous Rights and Colonial Subjecthood: Protection and Reform in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge, 2019).

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