Three recent books—released as part of the Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right series—offer new perspectives on the ideas, activism, and leading figures of the British ‘Far’ or ‘Extreme Right’. Taken together, they showcase the strengths, and shortcomings, of the present field of fascist studies.

The first, Graham Macklin’s *Failed Führers: A History of Britain’s Extreme Right* (2020), is a lengthy and near-comprehensive history, structured around biographical studies of five key individuals within the ‘British fascist tradition’—Arnold Leese, Oswald Mosley, A.K. Chesterton, John Tyndall, and Nick Griffin. The author adopts this ‘prosopografical’ approach in order to illuminate the ever-changing but essentially unbroken fascist tradition in Britain throughout the twentieth century and right up to the social media-driven terrorism of recent years. Through this approach, Macklin also wanted to foreground the actual human individuals who practiced and preached these abysmal ideas. But he is not interested in ‘great men’ and situates his subjects in their social and political contexts, foregrounding their journey through the network of extremist ‘groupuscules’ that made up the broader movement.

*A.K. Chesterton and the Evolution of Britain’s Extreme Right, 1933-1973*. By Luke LeCras. Routledge, London; New York, 2020. 180 pp. ISBN: 9781315697093, £22.49 (eBook).

*Lost Imperium: Far Right Visions of the British Empire*. By Paul Stocker. Routledge, London; New York, 2021. 256 pp. ISBN: 9780429468520, £31.49 (eBook).
The book’s most valuable contribution to the field results from the access Macklin obtained to a series of collections of private papers. The study draws on a range of archives and personal collections in Britain, the United States, New Zealand, and South Africa. Though there are questions about the ‘politics’ of these archives that Macklin does not address, the author’s ability to access them has unveiled a trove of new details. Containing new material on nearly every one of its subjects and featuring some of the first substantial biographical studies of others, this is as near to an encyclopaedia of the British extreme right as has yet been written. There is little doubt that Failed Führers will become a key reference book for scholars researching in this area for years to come.

Luke LeCras’ A.K. Chesterton and the Evolution of Britain’s Extreme Right, 1933-1973 (2020) reconsiders the life and legacy of one of the most influential, but often overshadowed, ideologues on the British ‘extreme right’. The author examines Chesterton ‘specifically within the framework of the extreme right’, charting his journey from his British settler roots in South Africa, through Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists, to his final role as the first chairman of the National Front. In doing so, LeCras maintains that Chesterton’s political life was dominated by the ideas and concerns of this ideological family, which included, but was not limited to, fascism. The particular value of LeCras’ study of Chesterton lies in the attention the author pays to Chesterton’s political ‘career’ after 1945. In this sense, the book addresses the deficiencies of the first biographical study of Chesterton, David Baker’s Ideology of Obsession: A. K. Chesterton and British Fascism (1996), which relegated his post-war political activities to a relatively brief epilogue. As LeCras demonstrates, Chesterton played a crucial role in reviving and, to some extent, rehabilitating extreme right thought after the well-deserved reputational damage it was dealt by the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Paul Stocker’s Lost Imperium: Far Right Visions of the British Empire (2021) constitutes the first comprehensive study of fascist imperial policy and the place of the British Empire in fascist ideology. Structured around case-studies of their attitudes towards five former colonial territories (Ireland, India, Palestine, Kenya, and Rhodesia), Stocker examines the British ‘far right’ (as he dubs them) from the first self-identifying ‘fascist’ groups in Britain during the 1920s to the National Front in the 1980s. Surveying the far right in the age of empire and of decolonization, Stocker argues that, while important, ‘the quest for an invigorated British imperialism’ was ‘largely secondary’ to other far right concerns, such as ‘[a]nti-communism, antisemitism, anti-liberalism and the pursuit of domestic objectives’. He claims that that British fascists were only interested in British imperialism insofar as it served as a ‘frame’ for the rhetorical expression of an essentially unrelated fascist ideology.

Some of the noteworthy chapters in Stocker’s book include those which reveal new information about British far right activists’ views on Palestine and Rhodesia. As Stocker shows, the far right were anti-Zionists but viewed Zionism in terms of an antisemitic conspiracy; views which, in the 1920s, they shared with leading politicians. At the same time, they were very much in favour of the expulsion of Jews from Britain, just to a homeland other than Palestine. The links Stocker has illuminated between the far right and the ‘Rhodesia lobby’ are both fascinating and worthy of further study. The section on Rhodesia even makes tantalizing, though brief,
suggestions that Chesterton’s pro-white settler conspiracy theories might have influenced the views and even actions of Rhodesia’s Ian Smith.

Read together as a trio, these books offer a wealth of empirical detail that will hopefully serve to inspire new and innovative studies of the variously termed British ‘far’ or ‘extreme’ right. However, all three books suffer from the same interpretative weakness, which leads the author to largely treat the British far/extreme right as a species apart with an esoteric ideology more or less entirely separate from British political traditions. Stocker comes closest to avoiding this tendency, notably in sections such as the few pages on the Monday Club and the Anglo-Rhodesian Society, but his eagerness to emphasize the far right’s distance from the mainstream leads to some surprising omissions. Macklin makes some nods here and there, while LeCras’ study, though interesting, is almost entirely insular.

While one is struck by these author’s ongoing discovery of new details, it is hard to escape the feeling that the historical wing of the field of fascist studies has wandered into something of a cul de sac. In the conclusion to his study, Macklin states that he seeks to tilt ‘the pendulum back in the other direction’ away from ‘cultural’ readings of fascism in the direction of more empirical studies. But the historians behind the ‘cultural turn’ brought a crucial, and now mostly abandoned, commitment to their studies of British fascism: to analyse fascism in relational terms, exploring and emphasizing its links to broader British history.1 The consequences of the failure to do so are illustrated by the flaws of the three books.

For instance, Macklin has unearthed new material regarding links between British and American white supremacists in the context of the former’s campaign against the so-called ‘coloured invasion’ and the racist riots in the Notting Hill. The author details these connections, gesturing towards the broader context by citing Elizabeth Buettner’s article on how discussions of Commonwealth immigration highlighted ‘the imaginative racial geographies of white Britons’.2 However, there is no further consideration about what this says about the history of politics of race in decolonizing Britain and what we might gain from an understanding of the far/extreme right’s place within it. Macklin also mentions Mosley’s early turn to anti-immigration politics in the 1950s but, again, this is not taken much further. There is little in-depth consideration of the way that Mosley and other far/extreme right activists were early adopters of anti-immigration politics and how they shaped the related discourse.

Stocker, on the other hand, largely refrains from investigating the connections between the far/extreme right’s support for the Empire and their opposition to immigration in any detail. Similar connections have been widely acknowledged and explored in others works on decolonization, Enoch Powell, and ‘postcolonial’

1 Thomas Linehan, British Fascism 1918–1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture (Manchester; New York, 2000), 201; Julie Gottlieb and Thomas Linehan, ‘Introduction: Culture and the British Far Right’, in Julie Gottlieb and Thomas Linehan, eds, The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain (London; New York, 2004), 2.
2 Elizabeth Buettner, ‘“This is Staffordshire not Alabama”: Racial Geographies of Commonwealth Immigration in Early 1960s Britain’, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 42 (2014), 710–40.
British racism. With modifications, their insights can be applied to Stocker’s subjects in a way that might deepen our understanding of the British far/extreme right. The latter’s opposition to immigration was inextricably linked to their views on empire and decolonization. They developed racialized narratives of victimhood, formulated with direct reference to the experiences of white settlers in southern Africa. Their affinities with ‘mainstream’ racists and imperialists in this regard demand that historians connect them to, and include them in, the wider history of race and decolonization in modern Britain.

These omissions point to the limited scope of Stocker’s analysis. The book focuses too heavily on the details of British fascist imperial policy, missing the more subtle and extensive ways in which the far/extreme right’s worldview was shaped by empire and imperial thinking. Empire was far more than rhetorical wrapping paper for British fascist ideology; it was not, as Stocker argues, merely a ‘frame’. Much like other British imperial enthusiasts before them, those on Britain’s far/extreme right saw the Empire and a masculine and ruggedly white imperial ‘spirit’ as the antidote to Britain’s problems. Applying that frontier ‘spirit’ to the metropole, so they believed, offered the means to rescue and revive the nation, rejuvenating the ‘decadent’ metropole, maintaining Britain’s hold on its colonies, and repelling the Jewish plot that they believed was afoot against the Empire. They returned to the theme of Empire and the ethos of imperial ‘White Man’ again and again, even after Britain had lost most of its colonies. The British far/extreme right’s enduring obsession with the Empire, maintained up to and beyond its dying days, tells us something about the essential nature of their ideology.

Historians miss all this and more when they overinflate the uniqueness or novelty of fascist ideology, as both Stocker and LeCras do. Doing so also obscures the way that some of the more unusual preoccupations of the far/extreme right have a longer history. The conspiracy theorizing and antisemitism of the British far/extreme right was part of a tradition of conspiracy theorizing about collapse of colonial power and about perceived Jewish influence in the Empire going back to the latter half of the nineteenth century. The British far/extreme right’s antisemitism and conspiracy-mindedness was bound up with their obsession with the Empire in other ways as well. Both offered a framework for ‘explaining’ world events that did not implicate their beloved imperial heritage. To relegate their imperial obsessions to a supporting role behind their paranoid fantasies about the ‘Jewish power’ imagines that these phenomena can be easily disentangled.

In the age of a racist, right-wing resurgence and of Black Lives Matter, why is it that the most innovative work on the history of white supremacism is being written mostly by people working outside of the field dedicated to studying it? At a time of growing concern that ideas such as those discussed in these books are

3 Bill Schwarz, Memories of Empire, Volume 1—The White Man’s World (Oxford, 2011); Camilla Schofield, Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain (Cambridge, 2013).
4 Liam J. Liburd, ‘White Against Empire: Decolonization, Immigration and Britain’s Radical Right, 1954–1967’, in Josh Doble, Liam J. Liburd and Emma Parker, eds, British Culture After Empire: Race, Decolonization, and Migration, since 1945, (Manchester, forthcoming late 2021).
5 Liam J. Liburd, ‘The Eternal Imperialists: Empire, Race and Gender on the British Radical Right, 1918-1968’, PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, 2019.
being ‘mainstreamed’, those working in the field of fascist studies should have something more important to say. Rather than tipping the balance away from cultural readings, as Macklin suggests, perhaps a return to or reinvigoration of the ‘cultural turn’—drawing on insights from cultural studies and associated fields, such as the (now not so) ‘new’ imperial history and postcolonial studies—might point the way out of the present blind alley. It might take the field beyond a preoccupation with the minutiae of fascist esoterism, stripping away the layers of Wagnerian drag to reveal the white supremacist essentials beneath. Looking at fascism with its jackboots off reveals its core values, values that expose its connection to the wider history of the politics of race and empire in Britain and Europe more broadly, entanglements that lead us back to the questions famously posed by Hannah Arendt and, before her, by Aimé Césaire and, before him, by Black radical intellectuals in the inter-war period. These figures were not simply asking ‘What is fascism?’ but rather ‘What does fascism really mean?’ Returning to these questions requires that our search for details be accompanied by a correspondingly energetic search for meaning.