

Englishness, Empire and Nostalgia: A Heterodox Religious Community's Appeal in the Inter-War Years

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This article looks at the ways in which the Panacea Society – a heterodox, millenarian group based in Bedford during the inter-war years – spread its ideas: through personal, familial and shared belief networks across the British empire; by building new modes of attracting adherents, in particular a global healing ministry; and by shipping its publications widely. It then examines how the society appealed to its (white) members in the empire in three ways: through its theology, which put Britain at the centre of the world; by presuming the necessity and existence of a 'Greater Britain' and the British empire, while in so many other quarters these entities were being questioned in the wake of World War I; and by a deliberately cultivated and nostalgic notion of 'Englishness'. The Panacea Society continued and developed the idea of the British empire as providential at a time when the idea no longer held currency in most circles. The article draws on the rich resource of letters in the Panacea Society archive to contribute to an emerging area of scholarship on migrants' experience in the early twentieth-century British empire (especially the dominions) and their sense of identity, in this case both religious and British.

Walking in the grounds of the army residency in Lucknow, India, on Easter Sunday 1925, Lieut. C. E. Harold Dolphin of the Lincolnshire Regiment found a little piece of the Union Jack flag that had fluttered to the ground after being torn off in the wind. He picked it up, feeling it to be of enormous significance, and sent it, along with a letter reporting on his spiritual progress, to the religious group to which he belonged, which was based in England.¹ The group was the Panacea Society, a millenarian community in Bedford, led by a woman named Octavia, their female messiah figure. She was

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¹ Bedford, Panacea Society Archives [hereafter: PS] F6.2/11, C. E. H. Dolphin to Miss Hilda Green, 3 May 1925.

delighted to receive the fragment of that Union Jack which had been flying in Lucknow and which had, appropriately, dropped through her letterbox in England on Empire Day, 24 May (Queen Victoria's birthday).²

The Panacea Society began in 1919 under the leadership of Mabel Barltrop in Bedford. There she created a community consisting of shared houses for members, mostly clustered on one street, a large garden and a chapel. Mrs Barltrop was a vicar's widow, who was identified by her followers as the daughter of God and the incarnation of the spiritual child of the early nineteenth-century prophet Joanna Southcott. Southcott had claimed in 1814 that she would give birth to such a messianic figure, 'Shiloh', but had died without (physically) doing so. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of other Southcottian prophets and movements emerged, of whom Mrs Barltrop was the last, creating a transnational millennial movement.³ She was renamed Octavia by her followers and presided over a society whose members believed they would attain immortal life on earth through a tough spiritual practice known as 'overcoming': this entailed making themselves 'zero' by constantly confessing and working on their faults and failings. They eagerly anticipated the Second Coming of Jesus, and gave Britain a prominent place in the millennium, coming to believe that their own garden was the original Garden of Eden and therefore would be the site of Jesus's return.⁴

While there were (at any one time) between fifty-five and seventy resident members of the community at Bedford during the inter-war years, there were also many hundreds of non-resident members. By 1934 (when Octavia died) there were 1,285 resident and non-resident members, and this number had risen to 1,978 by 1943. Of these, many had contact with the 'white settler countries' or dominions (Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa), as well as

² Established in 1902 as a day to teach schoolchildren the importance of the British empire and their responsibilities to it, by the 1920s Empire Day was being questioned in some quarters: J. English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904–1958', *HistJ* 44 (2006), 247–76.

³ For details of this movement, see Jane Shaw and Philip Lockley, *The History of a Modern Millennial Movement: The Southcottians* (London, 2017).

⁴ On the Panacea Society, see Jane Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God: The Story of a Female Messiah and her Followers* (London and New Haven, CT, 2011). The Panacea Museum in Bedford tells the community's history and displays its rich material culture; see its website, at: <<http://panaceatrust.org/the-panacea-museum/>>.

parts of the British empire such as India, through family members who had emigrated; and about 20 per cent of them were living in a part of the British empire or a white settler country, had done so in the past, or did so for a period of their membership of the Panacea Society.⁵

In addition, tens of thousands of correspondents were part of the society's global healing ministry, which attracted about 132,000 correspondents from its inception in 1923 until its closure in the early twenty-first century, the main years of activity being between 1923 and 1939. The majority of these healing applicants came from the USA (39,055), but following closely behind was Jamaica (33,074) and then Britain itself (23,385); the dominions accounted for nearly 4,000 (Australia 1,597, Canada 1,353, New Zealand 662, South Africa 289), Ghana, the Gold Coast and British Togo for 2,863. Most countries that had some particular relationship to Britain were represented, even if only by smaller numbers of applicants (Hong Kong 2, Ceylon 30 and so on). The highest numbers from European countries were Finland (3,346) and France (3,030).⁶

The inter-war years saw many challenges to the British empire: while imperial troops had been essential to Britain's capacity to fight in World War I, in the wake of that war the 'everydayness' or 'taken-for-grantedness' of empire, as Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose express it, was being questioned, both at home and in parts of the empire.⁷ But the Panacea Society retained an imperial mindset, drawing on a strong streak of nostalgia for a lost – or dying – sense of Britain and its place in the world. This meant that the society had a special appeal to many white Britons who lived in parts of the British empire, especially the dominions; it also reassured resident members back in the 'metropole' – Bedford, for them – that the old Britain with an intact empire still existed. There was a particular emphasis on a nostalgic notion of *Englishness*, which incorporated the imperial

⁵ On migration to the dominions in this period, see Stephen Constantine, *Emigrants and Empire: British Settlement in the Dominions between the Wars* (Manchester, 1990).

⁶ These figures were compiled by Alistair Lockhart of Cambridge University, and will be published in his forthcoming book on the Panacea Society's healing ministry.

⁷ Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, 'Introduction: Being At Home with the Empire', in eadem, eds, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006), 1–31, at 23. On the slow demolition of the imperial mindset in the twentieth century, see Andrew S. Thompson, 'Social Life and Cultural Representation: Empire in the Public Imagination', in idem, ed., *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2012), 251–97.

mindset as 'natural'. As Alison Light puts it, this phenomenon is 'a conservative embracing of modernity, shaped by the experience of dislocation after the First World War'. It represented 'a more intimate and everyday species of conservatism which caught the public imagination between the wars and could itself recast the imperial, as well as the national, idea of Englishness'.⁸

This article looks at the ways in which the Panacea Society spread its ideas: through personal, familial and shared belief networks across the British empire; by building new modes of attracting adherents; and by shipping its books widely. It then examines how the society appealed to its (white) members in the empire in three ways: through its theology, which put Britain at the centre of the world; by presuming the necessity and existence of a 'Greater Britain' when in so many other quarters this was being questioned in the wake of World War I; and by a deliberately cultivated and nostalgic notion of 'Englishness'. (It should be noted that Britishness and Englishness were largely fused, and used interchangeably, in the society's literature; members came from all parts of the United Kingdom, although there was a particularly high proportion of women and men from England.)

The article draws on the rich resource of letters from migrants sent in to the Panacea Society in the 1920s and 1930s, and therefore contributes to what is, at present, a rather sparse field, namely, the British migrant experience in the inter-war years. As the historian of migration Stephen Constantine notes, such collections of letters are far more plentiful for the nineteenth century and 'only a few collections dating to the twentieth century are yet publicly available and fewest of all from English migrants'.⁹ These letters, sent to the Panacea Society (an archive that has only recently been opened) especially relate senders' religious experiences and their sense of English (sometimes British) identity.¹⁰

⁸ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991), 11. On conservative modernity, see Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London, 2010); Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in Modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); Michael Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: 'Medieval Modernism' and the London Underground* (Oxford, 1999).

⁹ Stephen Constantine, "'Dear Grace ... Love Maidie': Interpreting a Migrant's Letters from Australia, 1926–67", in Kent Fedorowich and Andrew S. Thompson, eds, *Empire, Migration and Identity in the British World* (Manchester, 2013), 192–213, at 193.

¹⁰ On the opening of the Panacea Society archive, see Shaw, *Octavia*, ix–xiii; Shaw and Lockley, *History*, 2, 204–6.

SPREADING PANACEA IDEAS

Migration was the primary way most Britons knew about the British empire: those who left and those who remained at home became part of 'a global chain of kith and kin'.¹¹ The Panaceans spread their ideas initially through their personal and familial networks, many of which extended into the British empire. Dolphin heard about it from his cousin, Mary Warry, an enthusiastic non-resident Panacean who lived in Somerset. He joined the society in 1924 while he was living in Surrey on the verge of entering the army, and visited Bedford before he sailed for India. Once he arrived in India, Harold Dolphin brought others in. Within two months of getting to Lucknow, he was writing to Octavia that he had explained Panacea ideas to a friend in the regiment, a dissatisfied Christian Scientist. A few months later, he had signed up two of his regiment colleagues, and a third was interested. As he wrote to Miss Hilda Green, who headed up the Panacea correspondence department, 'It is awfully jolly there being three of us & I do so want to make it four!!' However, Mr Hastie (one of the group) 'is worried by the wish to get home & enjoy himself before the coming of the Kingdom. I suppose this is an attack of Lucifer's and hope it will soon pass away.' Dolphin's letters track both his spiritual progress and his attempts to bring others into the Panacea Society. By 1928, he had become engaged to his colonel's daughter, a Miss Eileen Johnson, who was 'so enthusiastic' about the Panacea Society but could not read the books at home 'for fear of her parents', who did not agree with its beliefs. At their first opportunity, when he had leave, they visited Bedford together.¹² Such visits back to the 'Centre', when they were possible, were highly valued by non-resident members for the in-person interviews with Octavia, the worship according to the Book of Common Prayer in chapel, and the charm of tea parties, shared meals and conversations with fellow believers, all reassuring them in both form and content that the England they loved had not yet died.

Many at the very heart of the Panacea Society had strong familial or personal connections to parts of the British empire, not least

¹¹ Kent Federowich and Andrew S. Thompson, 'Mapping the Contours of the British World: Empire, Migration and Identity', in *idem*, eds, *Empire*, 1–41, at 15. On migration, see also Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine, *Migration and Empire* (Oxford, 2011).

¹² PS, F6.2/11, C. E. H. Dolphin to Octavia, 11 December 1924; C. E. H. Dolphin to Miss Hilda Green, 9 April 1925, 5 May, 1926, 27 July 1928.

Octavia, through her two surviving sons (a third had died in World War I): Ivan lived in Vancouver and Adrian in India, where he served as an officer in the army and had very definite views on the importance of the British empire, writing, 'The Hindus and the Mohammedans will never see eye to eye and it is for this reason that India belongs to the British Empire.'¹³ Ivan had nothing to do with the society's beliefs, and Adrian later came to have deeply ambivalent and tortured feelings about his mother's religion, but in the early and mid-1920s he was an active member, who spread the word amongst his fellow army officers just as Dolphin did. In 1920, Captain Richard Maguire, who was at the Army Signal School, Kakul, Abbottabad, in India, wrote: 'Through Mr Bartrop who is now on a course at the school I got the wonderful news of the coming redemption of mankind.' His next letter, written in May 1921, demonstrates his efforts to tell others of his new conviction, but with little response, although one with whom he did have success was the twenty-one year old Lieut. D. M. Killingley, of the 17/37 Cavalry in Lucknow. After reading the books that Maguire had lent him, Killingley wrote to Bedford in June 1922: 'I am convinced that these writings are the truth, and I would like to know more about the whole thing.'¹⁴

Others back at the centre, in Bedford, who had strong personal connections to, or experiences of, the British empire included Mildred and William Hollingworth, who held key positions in the society as head of the healing ministry and head of the printing press respectively, and had been missionaries in Africa. Cyril Carew-Hunt, who had fought in World War I and attained the rank of major, had lived in Australia before the war and continued to have strong ties with his relatives there; he was the society's secretary and took on much of its general correspondence, especially after Octavia's death. Frances Wright, formerly a prominent Theosophist, and one of the wealthier members of the society, had lived in India. These leading members, at the centre of the society, set the tone with an imperial mindset, especially Octavia. She even dictated which newspapers members should read on these terms. In an editorial in *The Panacea*, the society's magazine, in 1934, she put the *Morning Post* at the top of the list because it was 'sound, loyal, independent and patriotic', especially on the monarchy and empire. The *Daily Express* was also

¹³ PS, A3.5/8, Adrian Bartrop to Miss Mason, 19 May 1927.

¹⁴ PS, F5.2/27, F6.3/10, Richard Maguire to the Panacea Society, 5 December 1920, 29 May 1921; F6.3/7, D. M. Killingley to the Panacea Society, 15 June 1922.

acceptable, for it was ‘a strong champion in the cause of Empire and free trade within it’. The *Daily Telegraph* was to be commended for its general news, but it was not sound on the India question (home rule was anathema to the Panaceans) or the League of Nations (also despised). Unacceptable were the *News Chronicle* and *Daily Herald* for their liberal views, the latter being admiring of Gandhi and ‘most impatient to give away India – and in fact, the whole Empire’.¹⁵

The Ricketts family – mother, son and daughter – were keen Panaceans and bridged England and different parts of the British empire. Thomas, known as Donald, was an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge, when he became a member of the society in 1922. He graduated in the summer of 1923, and in 1924 he joined the Indian army, being posted to Rangoon in Burma; he often wrote pieces about Burma for *The Panacea*. His faith was strong and he encouraged his mother, Annie, to join the society; she visited Bedford to become a member in March 1925 before going on to Adelaide, Australia, to live with her daughter Ruth. Donald wrote to his mother that he expected that she and his sister would be ‘the first to become “Panacea-ites” if the news has not already got there’.¹⁶ They appear to have been independent of any other Panaceans in Australia, keeping all their links directly with the society or via Donald in Burma. Annie spent time with Donald in Rangoon, while Ruth remained in Adelaide until going to live permanently in Bedford in 1929. Donald visited Bedford often. In 1943, he was awarded the OBE for ‘bravery and distinguished service in the evacuation of Burma’, where he had become Deputy Director of Evacuation and Deputy Conservator of Forests.¹⁷

¹⁵ ‘Newspaper Opinion must not Determine our Opinion’, *The Panacea* 11/126, 129–30. Issues of this magazine were not dated.

¹⁶ PS, F6.3/19, Donald Ricketts to the Panacea Society, 25 March 1925.

¹⁷ Information from A. C. Green, Assistant Archivist, Trinity College Library, Cambridge, 28 October 2009; *The Times*, 28 June 1924, 20 January 1943. The *London Gazette* reported of Ricketts’s bravery in 1943: ‘During the early stages of the evacuation of Rangoon, Mr Ricketts was in charge of the construction of all labour camps and welfare work in these camps. Later, when making arrangements at Mohnyin for housing and feeding evacuees, he was ordered, owing to the rapid Japanese advance, to start for India with his able-bodied refugees. Mr Ricketts[,] however, refused to leave behind any of the refugees in his charge and set out with a large number, including women, children and invalids. He led these overland 300 miles and was able to get more than 300 to safety. Mr Ricketts showed courage, determination and devotion to duty’: online at: <<http://www.angloburmeselibrary.com/extracts-from-the-london-gazette—awards-for-the-1942-evacuation.html>>, accessed 15 July, 2016. See also Shaw, *Octavia*, ch. 7, for

The Panacea Society also spread its ideas through a transnational network of shared beliefs, of which it was already a part, throughout the dominions and the USA: in the nineteenth century Southcottian groups had spread to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the USA.¹⁸ The Panacea Society now appealed to some in those existing networks who saw in Octavia the fulfilment of Southcott's teachings. Joseph Gardner, who had been born in Coventry in England in 1836 and had married a Canadian woman from Lake Ontario, was, by 1920, living in Temperanceville, near Toronto. He wrote to Octavia about how he had come to Panacean beliefs through the society's published materials. When he received copies of Octavia's scripts (collections of the messages she believed she received daily from God) he sent them 'to Toronto for the believers there', a group of four with whom he met from time to time. Two of them, brothers William and George Martlett, had been down to Cleveland, Ohio, to see an American member, Mrs Florence Cullum, where 'they met with a cordial reception'. These were the kind of existing networks through which Octavia's ideas were spreading. At the age of eighty-four, Gardner declared that he would remain in Canada until 'I get word from the Lord to take my flight to the City of refuge in England which our heavenly Father [h]as graciously provided for the Church of the First Born beforehand – I have been very busy making preparations to leave the country, freeing myself from entanglement'.¹⁹ The 'city of refuge' was, of course, Bedford, but Gardner never left Canada.

There was also an active group in Australia. Peter Rasmussen, the main distributor of Southcottian literature there, based in Sydney, travelled to England in 1922, quickly becoming Octavia's right-hand man and living the rest of his life in Bedford. But Octavia dissuaded most from turning up on her doorstep, and gave them tasks and duties in their own parts of the empire. Mrs Louise Coventry, who lived in the suburb of Newtown in Sydney, and had written at length to Octavia about her visionary experiences, was told 'Not to come here' but to prepare the way in Australia by selling books.²⁰ Mrs Coventry

a discussion of the sexual relationship that Donald Ricketts had with an American man, Edgar Peissart, at the Panacea Society in 1922–3, and the impact it had on community life.

¹⁸ See Shaw and Lockley, *History*.

¹⁹ PS, F6.3/10, Joseph Gardner to Octavia, 16 February, 7 May 1920.

²⁰ PS, F5.2/34, Louise Coventry to Octavia, 12 April 1923; Octavia to Louise Coventry, 26 June 1923.

remained in Australia, writing more letters back to Bedford between 1923 and 1925 than any other empire member. With her sister, Ellen Burke, she was at the centre of a group of Sydney Panaceans, including Alice West, a Mrs E. Hanley and Hans Anderson; the group had links to the existing Christian Israelite congregation, the Southcottian movement founded by John Wroe in the nineteenth century. In a late 1924 letter from Mrs Coventry, there is some insight into tensions within the small group, as Hans had begun to 'speak in ways I don't like of Octavia and Mrs Fox'. Ellen Burke also wrote often to Bedford, especially to seek advice about her trials with her Freemason husband, in July 1923 writing to ask if Octavia could explain to her husband that they must sleep in separate beds.²¹ The Panaceans back in Bedford long acted as spiritual and moral directors to non-resident members and those taking the water for healing, creating an 'agony aunt' correspondence that stretched over many parts of the world, especially the British empire and white settler countries.

The Sydney group expanded, and by 1925, a Mrs Forscutt had joined and was providing a room for the Sydney Panaceans to meet in. They also had contact with a group in Melbourne, which centred on two sisters, Jemima Ramm and Elizabeth Summers, who had come to live in Australia in 1885; they had come from an old Southcottian family in England. Jemima Ramm kept in close touch with Rasmussen once he went to live in Bedford, and one letter indicates that she was arranging for her nephew, Arthur Loms, to bring a package with him from Bedford when he was sailing back to Australia, and that she was 'longing for the time to come when I shall be with you if the Lord permits it'.²²

The Panaceans also spread their ideas through print. Certainly the society had plenty of books to sell – most of them by Octavia, who was highly prolific – and they shipped them efficiently around the empire. Many of the letters from empire members are about receiving and circulating the literature. An Anglican priest, Russell Payne, honorary canon of Calcutta Cathedral and chaplain of Kharagpur in West Bengal, found one of Octavia's books in Calcutta and was so taken with it that he became a member. A Canadian, Caroline D'Aguilar Henderson, wrote asking to become a member because she had read with profound interest Octavia's first book *Brushes with*

²¹ Ibid., Ellen Burke to Octavia, 1 July 1923.

²² PS, F5.2/27, Jemima Ramm to Peter Rasmussen, [December 1920].

the Bishops, which she had obtained in the public library in Victoria, British Columbia, where she lived. She noted 'I am writing from a far West city of the most Western Province of the Dominion of Canada so that you may know that the 'pulse' of these things is beating here.' She also enclosed a hymn that she had written, titled 'Glorious Advent'. She received a reply from the Panacea Society with details of her membership, appreciation for her hymn and the suggestion that she meet up with another Panacean, a Mr W. Richards in Vancouver. In her reply, Caroline Henderson gently pointed out that he was some distance away, a fact about the vastness of parts of the empire that those in the Bedford headquarters did not always realize: 'In reference to the address given of Mr. Richards I would say Vancouver is five hours journey by water from Victoria. It is the terminal city of the Canadian Pacific Railway on the Mainland.' However, she added: 'I shall write him and if I take a trip to Vancouver will try to see him.'²³

Networks and literature could only do so much. In 1924, five years into the life of the community, the Panaceans developed a healing ministry that enabled them to become truly global. Octavia was declared to have healing powers, and these were transferred to water – used for drinking, bathing, topical treatments and protection – via little squares of linen, neatly cut up with pinking shears, upon which Octavia had breathed her divine breath, and which were then put into ordinary tap water. These could be sent anywhere by post, along with precise instructions for use. The healing proved popular both within Britain and abroad; by the time of Octavia's death in 1934, ten years after it had gone public, 32,742 people had applied for the healing; by 1943, 72, 806; and by the beginning of the twenty-first century the total number of correspondents since 1924 was just over 132,000.²⁴

The Panacea Society deliberately targeted those in the empire in the earliest advertisements for the healing, which were placed in local newspapers such as the *Rangoon Gazette* in India, and invited people to write in stating all their complaints in as few words as possible. The society also advertised in Theosophist magazines such as the *Herald of the Star*, which had an international circulation, and these

²³ PS, F6.3/11, Caroline D'Aguilar Henderson to the Panacea Society, 7 July, 25 August 1920.

²⁴ These statistics are taken from Shaw, *Octavia*, ch. 8.

advertisements drew the first applications for the healing from Australia and New Zealand.

Once people signed up for the healing, they had to report quarterly. People responded enthusiastically, usually with details of their illness and to what extent they were now feeling better, but also sometimes relating surprising uses of the water, specific to their geographical contexts. Geraldine Bartrup from Upland Farm in North Shepstone, Natal, wrote to report that she had had an infestation of locusts and beat them away not only with police whistles and tins but also by sprinkling them with the blessed water – and the locusts had not returned. Archie Clark in Australia sprinkled his paddocks when he found his sheep dying from a sudden disease and all but one sheep recovered, while Miss Irving, also in Australia, sprinkled a bite she received from a poisonous redback spider and was fine.²⁵

As the healing ministry grew – 4,339 people had applied by March 1926, two years after the healing had gone public – so the task of responding to all those letters became burdensome to the resident members working in the healing department in Bedford. They realized that they could not reply to each letter every quarter; this was distressing because they knew they were ministering to many across the globe. People wrote in about everything – their most intimate secrets, fears and problems as well as regular health complaints – for, as one man put it, ‘You understand people.’²⁶ In addition, while the mail was essential to the healing ministry, it was also slow, coming and going by boat to distant parts of the empire. The solution was to select local, trusted Panaceans, whom they named the Towers, to head up satellite healing headquarters, gathering in and responding to the quarterly reports of the water-takers, as well as sending out the linen squares, and then simply sending a summary regularly to Bedford headquarters. All major parts of the British empire had such Towers except the British West Indies; those in the healing there always reported directly to Bedford. From time to time, brief reports from the Towers would appear in *The Panacea*. In 1930, reports appeared on the healing ministry on all five continents, but still the focus was on the empire. The writer noted: ‘Our possession of India brings under the protection of our Society the continent of Asia,

²⁵ PS, F6.2/3, Geraldine Bartrup to Miss H. Green, 14 March 1932; S6.1/7, Elinor Partridge to the Panacea Healing Department, 4 November 1935.

²⁶ PS, F5.2/17, Joseph Taylor to Emily Goodwin at the Panacea Society, 11 September 1929.

where many faithful English people, as well as Hindus and other native races, are using the Healing treatment.’ Many Panaceans in England had family members in India and the article went on to say: ‘It is no small satisfaction to many who have relatives in India to remember that, at this difficult time, the protection by the Spirit and the Water, is available.’ Of Africa, the reporter noted: ‘In Africa, many difficulties are presented, owing to its vastness and very divided elements.’ Again, the healing water would help: ‘It is well to remember, when reading of political difficulties in S. Africa, that to have patients there taking the Water helps the whole colony.’ National stereotypes were also reinforced. Americans were not always so keen on the healing because they ‘like quick results, and “slow but sure” measures do not appeal to them’. By contrast, the Canadians, who had their own Tower, ‘are easier people to deal with. Many settlers had not left the Motherland until they were grown up, and retain their sturdy English traits, not taking easily to a new idea, but steadily persevering when they have once started on the healing water.’²⁷ Some people who took the healing water became interested in the society’s beliefs and joined. Others did not. But it was certainly one way in which the society continued to grow up to the early 1940s.

THE APPEAL OF THE PANACEA SOCIETY TO THOSE LIVING IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Many members of the Panacea Society reported that they were attracted to the promise of eternal life on earth, the spiritual practices which made their daily life more bearable, and the hope carried in the healing water. We may therefore presume that the Panacean core belief in immortality was what appealed to so many. But what would immortal life on this earth be like? The Panaceans put Britain at the heart of the world, and Bedford at the centre of the cosmos, and reflected this in their theology. They believed that Jesus would return to their corner of England, Bedford; and their idea of paradise was a tea party in their gardens, which, one day, Jesus would be enjoying with them. The *eschaton* was not so much about the end of the world as it was about a nostalgic version of the English and British imperial world. The Panaceans were intensely royalist and believed that their work meant that Britain – still, for them, ruler of a major

²⁷ ‘Our Towers in Five Continents’, *The Panacea* 7/76, 94–5.

empire – was ‘the Motherland of the world because she is the country in which DIVINE RULE is beginning, slowly but surely, to operate’. And that divine rule was through ‘H. M. King George V who is heir of the world, being descended from David, who was chosen by God to initiate the Royal line which sits on the Throne of Great Britain’.²⁸ In other words, when Jesus returned he would come to Bedford, and Britain would rule in the new Millennium.

Just at a moment when so many elements of the British empire were being questioned, the Panacea Society taught that such an empire, with Britain at its helm, still existed, would always exist, and was essential to God’s great plan for the world. The Panaceans, conservative in their political views, intensely disliked the League of Nations and any form of internationalism, considering it threatening to the empire and therefore theologically damaging. In an editorial in *The Panacea* in 1931, internationalism was named as one of the factors hindering the Lord’s coming, along with socialism, democracy, philanthropy, disarmament, and home rule for India.²⁹ Major Cyril Carew-Hunt (who had spent time living in Australia but not India), writing in *The Panacea* in 1930 on ‘Our Troubles in India and some of the Causes’, suggested that the people of India did not want ‘the latest forms of Western democracy, for it makes no appeal to them and runs counter to all their traditions (which are many), their caste systems, and, indeed to their whole social structure’. Rather, ‘Personal rule under the British official, or his own Rajah, is what appeals to the native of India.’ He ended his article by reminding the reader that ‘British engineers have built up a railway service of 40,000 miles and transformed huge areas of barren land into fertile tracts. British investments in India amount, at the least estimate, to 1,000,000,000 pounds, to which the country owes the development of its trade.’³⁰ In other words, the white man should be at the centre of this world; but through democracy, home rule for India and other popular movements, he was destroying that which he had built and which had made Britain great.³¹

²⁸ Mark Proctor [Octavia’s male pen name, which she assumed when she wrote some articles, especially on political or church-related topics], ‘Buy British’, *The Panacea* 8/93, 198–9.

²⁹ Editorial, *The Panacea* 8/95, 242.

³⁰ Cyril Carew-Hunt, ‘Our Troubles in India and some of the Causes: The Present Constitution’, *The Panacea* 7/80, 180.

³¹ For an analysis of this dynamic, see Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, 1: The White Man’s World* (Oxford, 2011).

In 1931, all Panacea members were instructed to ‘Buy British’ – a campaign inaugurated by the prince of Wales that year – which included not only goods made in Britain but also all dominion and colonial produce. Many members of the society joined the Tudor Rose League, an employer-sponsored, popular movement for protectionism to circumvent the free trade position of the British government. Octavia wrote to the head of that league, Rear Admiral Mark Kerr, in 1931:

... in days when Internationalism is becoming a positive religion, and the idea of a United States of Europe is projected with such amazing seriousness, it is very necessary that Great Britain should take her place as the premier power of the world, because she is the Divine Battle-Axe against all that opposes her destiny to govern a world redeemed from all distressing circumstances.³²

She had written in *The Panacea*: ‘Through the Panacea Society, there are enough people all over the world to begin to “Buy British” with a deep understanding of the Divine Purpose which is at the root of all present-day conditions.’³³

Panaceans visited and celebrated the British empire exhibition at Wembley opened by George V on 23 April (St George’s Day) 1924, where each of the colonies had their own pavilion. One member wrote an article about her visit in *The Panacea*: ‘Men of every colour, of every race, creed and ideal, all salute the old flag with a sturdy, filial pride. Never has there been such a gathering of the nations. ... It is a pageant of Empire such as has never been seen before.’ She refuted those critics who said that ‘the British Empire had reached the top of its curve and will inevitably go down, down, down to the dogs’, concluding that a nation that could produce such an exhibition ‘has immortality at the back of it and will never die’. For the Panaceans, ‘Britain’s destiny was to become the New Jerusalem’.³⁴

The Panaceans believed still in ‘Greater Britain’, a late Victorian idea that the ‘white settler colonies’ – Australia, New Zealand, Canada and parts of South Africa – formed a potential union with the United Kingdom, which would guarantee both British strength and a stable world. Developed especially by J. R. Seeley in the 1880s,

³² PS, F2.4/33, Octavia to Mark Kerr, 29 November 1931.

³³ Proctor, ‘Buy British’, 20.

³⁴ F. S. Stuart, ‘Wembley and After’, *The Panacea* 1/4, 80–1.

this idea was being radically questioned by the 1920s, especially in Canada and South Africa.³⁵ But some still adhered to it, including at this time many in Australia and New Zealand, and a 1931 article in *The Panacea* by Mrs E. Stone, the Tower for Australia, reflected this. 'Australia is a very wonderful and beautiful country', she wrote. 'We have in our midst a sprinkling of all nations of the world, but Australians are essentially a British race, speaking the English tongue and holding fast to British traditions and customs, our laws being based on the British constitution.' The Aboriginal people were nowhere in this mindset: 'God gave to England the wonderful possession of Australia when Captain Cook first planted the Union Jack on April 28th, 1770.'³⁶

A nostalgic and domestic version of 'Englishness', sitting at the heart of British imperial society, was cultivated. *The Panacea*, which was circulated to members in the empire, was full of articles that had titles such as 'Merrie England' (by Colonel Sullivan, MBE) and poems like 'God's England'. Short stories and serialized novels featured Trollopean cathedral closes, usually with a recalcitrant bishop or dean who would not accept Panacea teachings and a marginal cleric or clergy wife who saw the light. Visually, the magazine also provoked nostalgia, with reproductions of watercolours by painters who were at their height in the late nineteenth century, such as G. F. Nicholls, Sutton Palmer and Alfred Heaton Cooper, of rural scenes with country cottages and medieval churches, abbeys and gardens, conjuring up a supposed golden age, when everyone knew their place under the squire and was happy. (There were definitely no modernist landscapes by artists like John or Paul Nash in Panacea publications.) It was a nostalgic view reinforced by Stanley Baldwin, Octavia's favourite politician, in his address 'On England' to the Royal Society of St George in 1924, when he depicted a timeless, rural England in a rapidly changing, urbanized and suburbanized world.³⁷

Central to this 'timeless' notion of England was a deep devotion to the Book of Common Prayer. Evening prayer was said every night

³⁵ J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883). On this idea and its development, see Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007). On the attitudes of the dominions to it in the inter-war years, see John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009), chs 8–9.

³⁶ E. Stone, 'Signs of the Times in Australia', *The Panacea* 7/182, 226.

³⁷ Stanley Baldwin, *On England* (London, 1926).

in the Panacea chapel in Bedford according to the Book of Common Prayer, the only addition being a third reading, the prophecy which Octavia sat down each afternoon to receive from the Lord by a process of automatic writing. Octavia also celebrated communion according to the Book of Common Prayer. This meant that worship had a deep familiarity to it, the only variations being the novelty of a woman officiating and presiding, and a new lesson each night – which they fervently believed was directly received from God. Not surprisingly, then, the Panaceans were deeply opposed to Prayer Book revision in 1927–8. On 12 June 1928, Octavia took the ‘Deposited’ (rewritten) Prayer Book to chapel along with the Book of Common Prayer, and threw the new book to the ground, stating: ‘We shall use the old Prayer Book, as the Bishops have given permission to the people that they can do as they like about it.’ She then took the 1662 book around to all the members gathered in the chapel and ‘each put it to their lips in token of affection and devotion to it’. Two days later, when parliament voted on it, Octavia, Peter Rasmussen and two other members huddled around the wireless waiting for the decision to come through, and were delighted when the Commons rejected the revised Prayer Book by a majority of forty-six.³⁸

All of this was appealing to the conservative middle classes, not least those white Britons who lived in the empire and longed for ‘home’, especially home as they remembered it, before the disruption of war and the new and unsettling forms of modern life, from talking pictures to short skirts to air travel to the demise of domestic servants to reliable birth control to ribbons of suburban housing. They wanted ‘home’ as they remembered it. An exchange in Virginia Woolf’s *The Years* (1937) sums this up. Eleanor Pargiter comments on the ‘Brand-new villas everywhere ... Little red villas along the road.’ Her nephew North, just returned from Africa, replies: ‘Yes, that’s what strikes me, how you’ve spoilt England while I’ve been away.’³⁹

Letters from members living in the empire often expressed their gratitude to the society for providing a link to ‘home’ as they remembered it. Mrs Ethel Scales was a member living in Kamloops, British Columbia, where her husband, John Scales, had a photog-

³⁸ Rachel J. Fox, *How we Built Jerusalem in England’s Green and Pleasant Land, Part II* (Bedford, 1934), 68–9, 75–7.

³⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (Oxford, 2009; first publ. 1937), 357. Woolf’s husband Leonard had been a colonial administrator in Ceylon and had returned home.

raphy studio, part of a network of Panaceans in British Columbia and Washington state; she wrote to Ellen Oliver, an early prominent member, to thank her for sending some photographs of the English countryside, which had touched off memories of the old country and her now deceased parents.

I received your packet of Post Cards, it was truly thoughtful and kind of you to send them, it took me back to my old home, & a drive we had with my parents just before we came away, to Leith Hill – they both passed about 18 months ago, within 19 days of one another; they were 83 years – same day – same age & we celebrated their Golden Wedding in 1910 just before we left the old country. I'm telling you this just to show what a tender spot you touched in doing such a thoughtful deed.⁴⁰

For Harold Dolphin, the arrival of any Panacea publications was a highlight: 'the brightest spot in the week is when the weekly scripts arrive, & the big monthly mail with *The Panacea!* How I look forward to them – they are just everything, & however busy one is, there is always time to read them.'⁴¹

The Panacea Society was the answer to any sense of alienation: a short story in *The Panacea* magazine, revealingly titled 'The Exile', told the story of an Englishman who was unable to get a cure for his cough when living in the Transvaal – until he heard about the healing water and, on taking it, felt for the first time in years that 'life was worth living'.⁴²

Canon Russell Payne, the Anglican cleric from Calcutta, was one member who left 'the exile' of the empire and came to live in this nostalgic version of home. He and his wife Mary joined the society in 1928, and arrived in Bedford in April 1932. They had been longing to get back to England for some time, for they were 'very tired of the climate here, we have 9 months of heat, and would give anything for a cold climate', as Mrs Payne wrote.⁴³ By 1932, Canon Payne had drawn the wrath of the bishop of Calcutta for incorporating Panacea beliefs into his preaching and it was hard for him to continue working there. But what employment might a fifty-nine-year-old clergyman

⁴⁰ PS, F6.4/8, Ethel Scales to Ellen Oliver, 4 July 1919.

⁴¹ PS, F6.2/11, Harold Dolphin to Octavia, 11 December 1924.

⁴² *The Panacea* 2/21, 210.

⁴³ PS, F5.1/24, Mary Payne to Emily Goodwin, 28 October, 26 December 1928.

who had spent most of his career in India and embraced heterodox beliefs realistically find back in the Church of England? The Panacea Society was the means by which the Paynes could return to England, where they lived in a community house in return for their work, for they had few possessions and little wealth. Canon and Mrs Payne were the exception; the majority of Panacea members in the empire merely enjoyed this 'period piece' religion by correspondence, literature and the healing water. Far from England, they could believe that the Panacean version of home might just be reality.

CONCLUSION

In its heterodox theology, the Panacea Society was idiosyncratic and for that reason never attracted large numbers. But it was representative of another face of modernity to which historians are increasingly paying attention: the 'conservative modern'. It was therefore more symbolic of the culture, especially the preoccupations and concerns of a certain section of the middle classes, than it might at first glance appear. The British empire and all it stood for was an important part of those preoccupations and concerns, and the Panacea Society knew how to tap into the strong feelings that (nostalgic) ideas of England and the British empire evoked, and relate those feelings to its distinctive theology.

The Panaceans presented themselves as 'more Anglican' than the Church of England, believing that they were the true extension of the Church of England, which had taken a wrong turn by embracing liberal modernism; and they maintained a more consistently imperial outlook in their activities and beliefs than was prevalent or usual in the post World War I period. In particular, the society's theological outlook meant that the Panaceans retained a particular view of empire that had been ideologically important to the foundation of the British empire: Christian providentialism.⁴⁴ The British empire was seen as part of God's plan. This idea retained its hold in the nineteenth century and was, indeed, used to explain how this vast empire had come into being, given that it seemed inexplicable in

⁴⁴ For a discussion of this theological idea and its impact on the origins of, and rationale for, the British empire, see David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000), especially ch. 3.

human or worldly terms.⁴⁵ However, by the twentieth century the idea of a providential empire was losing currency in most circles. The Panaceans kept it alive and gave it their own particular twist, by relating it to their theology of the Second Coming, which incorporated their ideas about Britain and its empire with remarkable geographic specificity and a certain heterodox quirkiness: Jesus would return to Bedford, their own community being the physical centre for *everything* that happened of metaphysical import. From Bedford, Jesus would conduct his divine rule, and thus Britain would rule in the new millennium. The British empire was therefore an essential and providential component of the *eschaton* as the Panaceans envisaged it.

The Panacea Society was remarkably effective at spreading its message through its networks, literature and advertising: its reach across the British empire from Bedford to migrants and others who regarded themselves as English (or British), however long they had been living away from the country, was significant. In its theology and politics, the society appealed to those who longed for a sense of 'Englishness' and an imperial Britain that were passing away in the wake of World War I. While there were others who welcomed that global shift towards a breaking apart of the empire and a move towards home rule, there were others who did not. The correspondence from white Panacea members and 'water-takers' living in the dominions and other parts of the British empire reveals attitudes towards 'home' that are rare in archives for this period, and suggest that a potentially fruitful area for further research on migrant experience is in correspondence of this sort. These letters explain the appeal of this heterodox religious group, not only with the conservative middle classes in Britain but also across the British empire. Read alongside the Panacea Society's literature, they reveal a picture of a transnational network that epitomized a 'conservative modern' mindset in the inter-war years, and the centrality of notions of empire to that mindset.

⁴⁵ See, in this volume, Stewart J. Brown, 'Providential Empire? The Established Church of England and the Nineteenth-Century British Empire in India', 225–59.