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Review of *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* by James Belich

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During the early modern era, the great powers of the world enjoyed a rough parity of strength. But in the nineteenth century, during a great “divergence,” the Anglo-American world gained ground over the others. Some historians have attributed this to inherent advantages of Anglo-Saxon culture, others to the natural resources of the Anglo world, and others to its growth-promoting institutions. James Belich believes historians must also consider another factor, what he calls the Anglo-American “Settler Revolution” of the nineteenth century.

Other European powers, Belich argues, did not have the staying power of the Anglo-American world. The Dutch, for example, had an earlier start and quickly built an empire with English-style entrepreneurship, but they “were not great settlers.” Belich reviews and dismisses the imperial accomplishments of Spain, Portugal, Russia, and China and convincingly establishes the uniqueness of and the long-term advantages bestowed by the “Anglophone settler explosion” of the nineteenth century. While explaining the Anglo-American Settler Revolution, he also expertly analyzes a large corpus of scholarship on industrialization, transportation, communication, railroads, steam power, banking, literacy, printing, newspapers, and mail, explaining how they all abetted the Anglophone settlement boom.

While settling had become physically less arduous by the nineteenth century, the Settler Revolution also required a broad change in social attitudes. Until 1800, skepticism and fear of pioneering still persisted, even among ambitious New Englanders. But instead of being seen as “shoveling out your paupers to where they might die,” emigration finally became honorable and a new frontier spirit came to be celebrated by figures such as James Fenimore Cooper, Francis Parkman, and Frederick Jackson Turner. The young British historian Thomas Arnold wrote an award-winning essay at Oxford in 1815 rejecting the criticism of emigration by citing Genesis—“And God blessed them, and God said unto them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it’”—and thus provided Belich with the title for his book. Arnold’s essay became a part of what Belich sees as “a tidal shift in mass attitudes to emigration” which fostered the Settler Revolution. These favorable attitudes cohered into the ideology of the Settler Revolution, what Belich calls “settlerism.” Settlerism undergirded the settlement booms of the American Midwest and Great Plains.

Belich also emphasizes that American frontier territories and states benefited from “cloning,” or the reproduction of democratic institutions that developed in colonial America and then were institutionalized by the American Revolution. He acknowledges that these growth-friendly political institutions were crucial to effective frontier development,
but argues that their success was strongly linked to the emergence of an improved transportation infrastructure and settlerism.

In addition to studying settlement booms, Belich also explores busts and the “recolonization,” or economic and cultural integration, of frontier areas into metropolitan commercial centers such as Chicago, New York, and London. Although frontier populations often criticized the economic and cultural power of distant urban centers and, at times, embraced populist forms of protest, Belich sees the relationship as largely reciprocal.

Replenishing the Earth is a sweeping account that synthesizes scores of monographs and is a remarkable achievement, representing the best of Big Picture history. By elucidating how the British Empire retained its global dominance for so long and how the United States emerged as a Great Power, Belich’s book explains how the frontier settlement process made the modern world.

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