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Spitsbergen - Imperialists beyond the British Empire.

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Geopolitics

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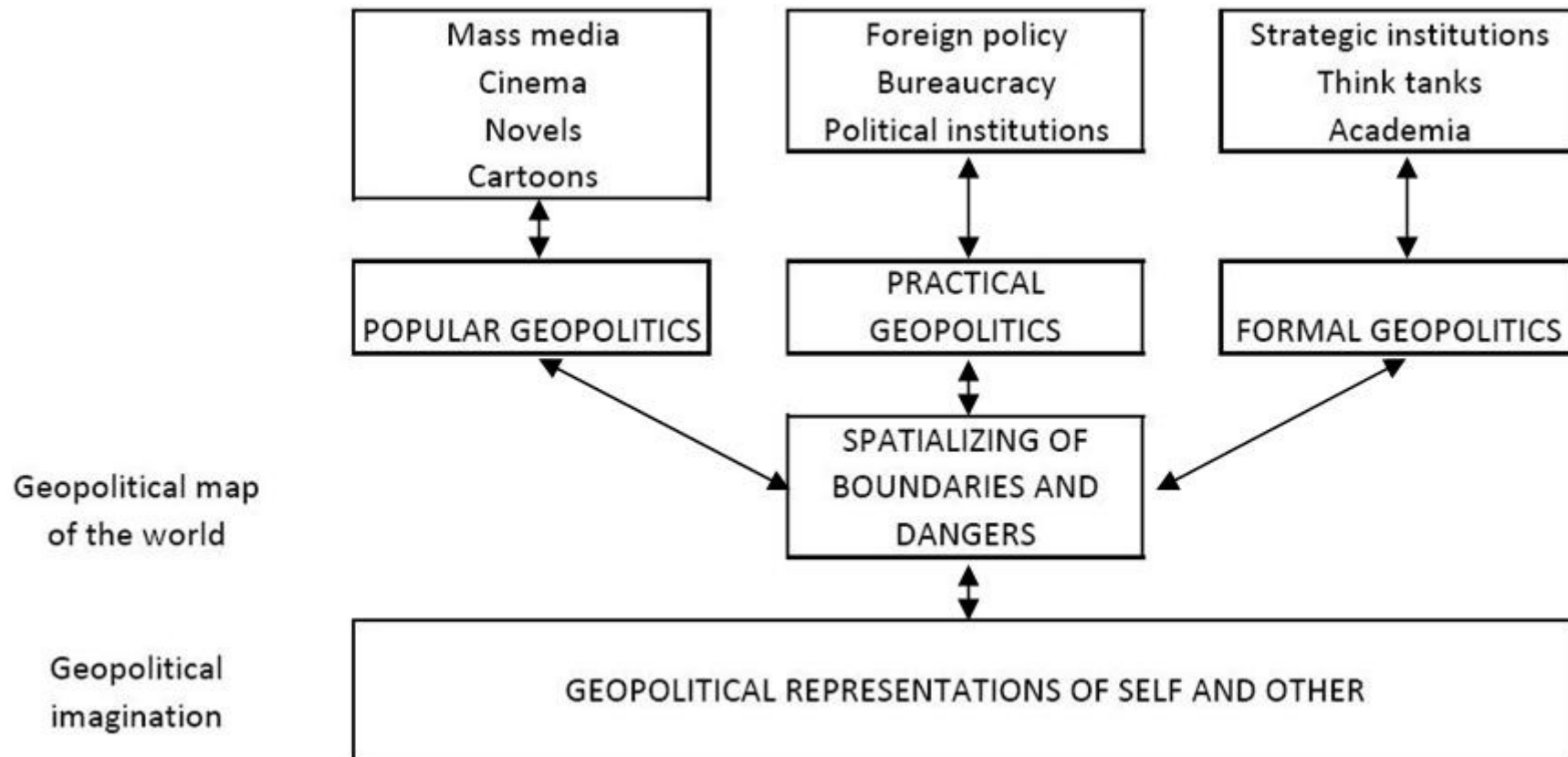
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“[It can be used] to campaign and mobilize public support for different political geographical representations of the world.”

Dodds, K., *Geopolitics – A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007





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Pax Britannica





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“[Empire] had meant different things to different generations in Britain – military power, commercial opportunity, prestige.”

Morris, J., *Pax Britannica – the climax of an empire*, London, 1979



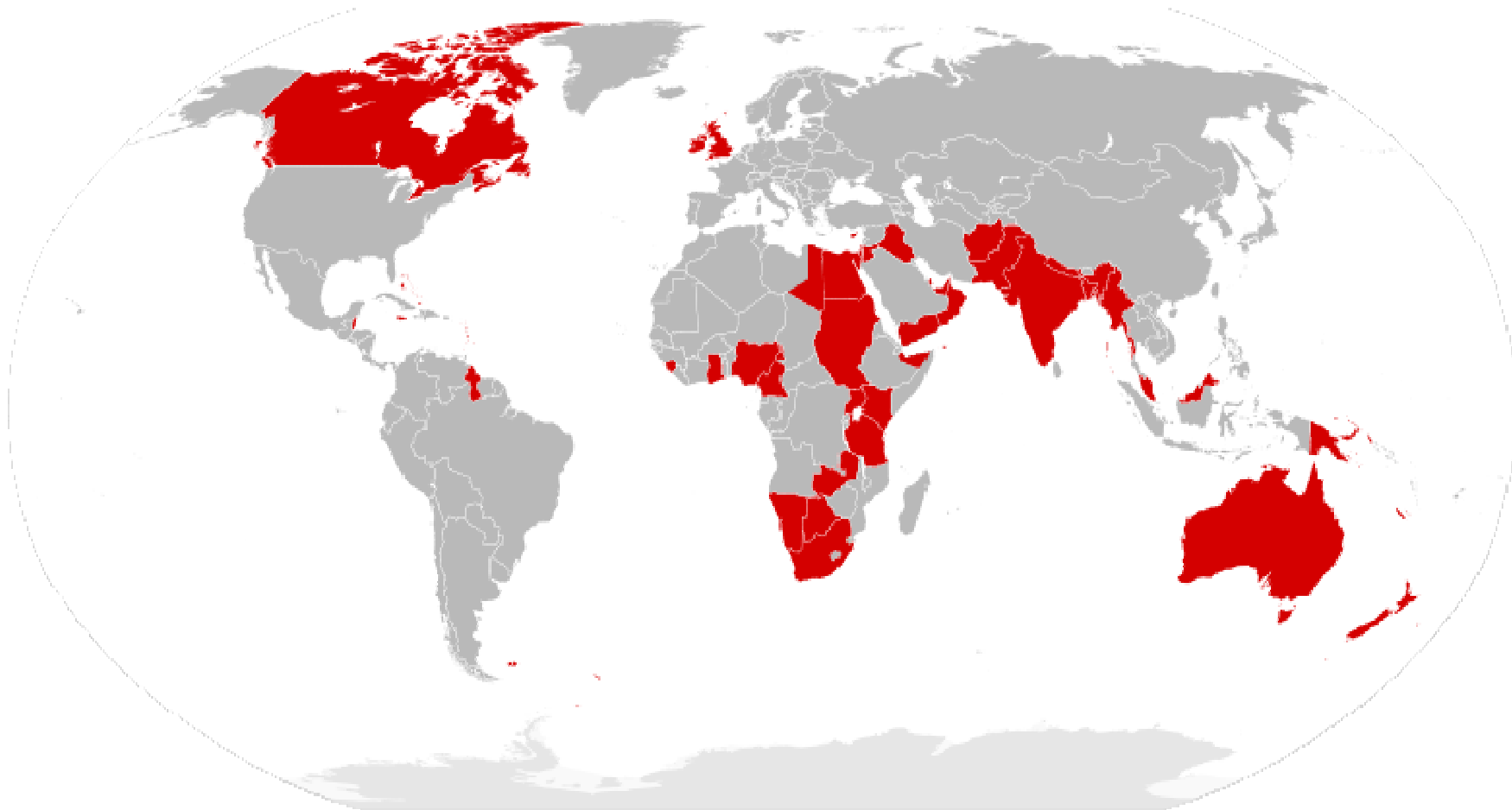
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The British Empire in 1919



W. Martin Conway

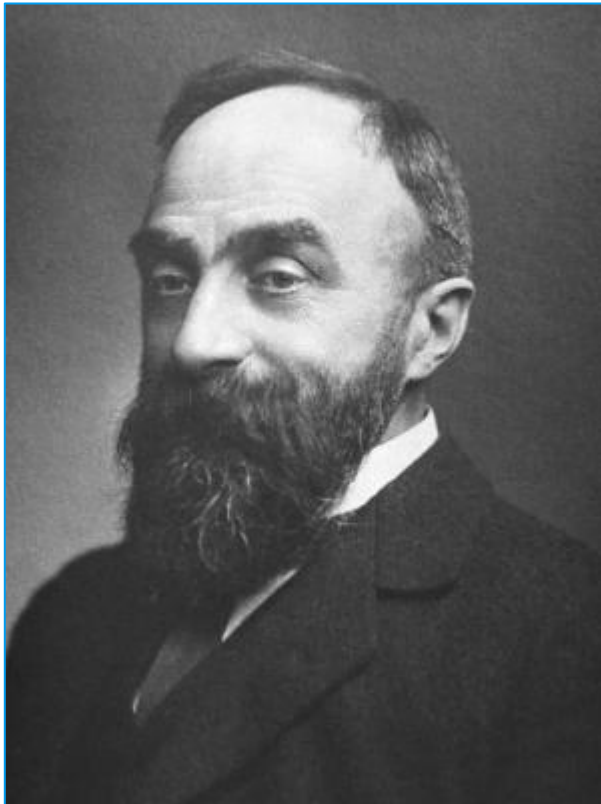


W. Martin Conway (1856-1937)
Art Critic, Mountaineer &
Explorer

- 1893 – fellow of the RGS
- 1895 – knighted for survey in the Himalayas
- 1896 – first crossing of Spitsbergen
- 1897 – second expedition to Spitsbergen
- 11 publications betw. 1897 & 1919
- 1918-31 – MP, raised to peerage



William Speirs Bruce



William S. Bruce (1867-1921)
Naturalist & Oceanographer

- 1892-3 – Dundee Whaling Exp.
- 1896 – Jackson-Harmsworth Exp.
- 1898 & 9 – Spitsbergen (Albert I.)
- 1902-4 – Scottish National Antarctic Exp.
- 1906 & 7 – Spitsbergen (PCF)
- 1909 – founded the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate
- 1912 & 14 – Spitsbergen
- 1919 - Spitsbergen





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‘But their energies were directed rather to the history of geographical discovery and to the exploration of particular regions than to geography as a department of scientific research.’

Keltie, J., 1917, Thirty Years’ Work of the Royal Geographical Society, *Geographical Journal* **49** (5): 350-72



Douglas Freshfield



Douglas Freshfield
RGS President 1914-16

“[He] had the courage to defy the tacit convention that the Society should have no dealings with politics. Party politics, he admitted, must be rigidly excluded; but at a time when all parties were at one on national questions he held that the Society was entitled to make its views known on pertinent facts and the wider aspects of national policy. A minor case in point arose on a paper by Sir Martin Conway on the unsettled status of Spitsbergen, and communications were made to the Foreign Office on the subject.”

Mill, H. R., *The Record of the R. G. S. 1830-1930*, London, 1930



Spitsbergen Coal & Trading Company, 1904



Spitsbergen Mining & Exploration Syndicate, 1906



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Foreign Office



**United Kingdom
Foreign & Commonwealth Office**



Foreign Office 1897

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“As the Russian Govt stated in 1871 that they would not object to Swedish Colonies in these islands, it is presumed they would raise no objection to a Norwegian Post Office there.”

FO 83.2147 Spitzbergen 1897-1905, National Archives, London



Foreign Office 1904-5

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“With regard to the minor question of the deposit of the so-called little deeds [...] This suggestion of Dr Salter seems to have been made with the object of getting HMG associated in some sort of way, however limited and indirect with the Company’s enterprise.”

FO 83.2147 Spitzbergen 1897-1905, National Archives, London



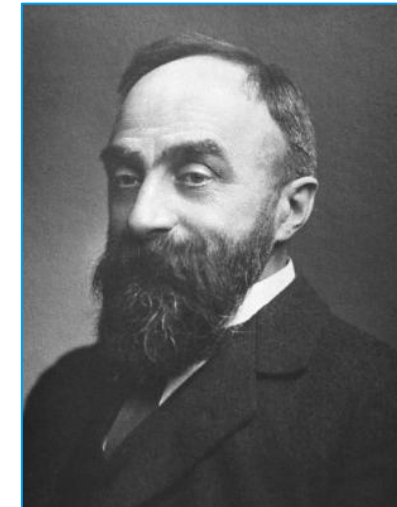
Annexation 1912

‘To protect these claims Bruce petitioned the British government to re-assess British rights to the sovereign control over the archipelago. There was little real interest in Whitehall [...],

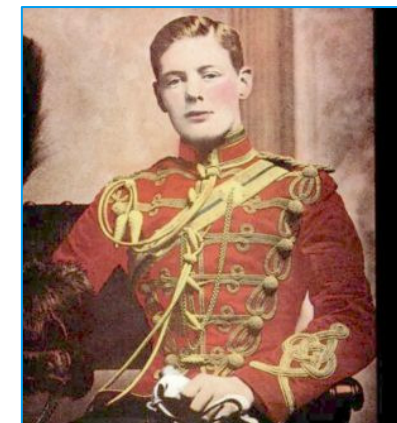
“I have had the matter carefully considered by my expert advisers, and they have shown me good reason for thinking that it would be useless for us to assert a claim to Spitsbergen, even if it were possible to do so.”

(Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, 1912)

Speak, P., 1992, William Speirs Bruce: Scottish nationalist and polar explorer, *Polar Record* **28** (167): 285-292



Bruce, nd



Churchill, 1895



Annexation 1916-7

RGS to Bruce, Dec 1916, 'You will be glad to know that the Council yesterday decided to send the following resolution to the Foreign Office: That the Council of the Royal Geographical Society beg leave to represent to His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs the urgent importance of taking immediate steps to safeguard British interests, political, strategic, and commercial, in Spitzbergen, and to urge that the matter be adjusted with our Allies before the termination of the war.'

Foreign Office to RGS, Mar 1917, '[...] the question of Spitzbergen, which cannot be decided without discussion with several foreign Governments, is not one in which any definite settlement can be come to now, as the present moment is not opportune for bringing forward matters of this nature.'



Annexation 1917

“There is no naval reasons which would make the annexation of the island by this country necessary at the present time, particularly as a purely formal annexation without the presence of an armed force would not in itself affect whatever possibility may exist of the island being used by our enemies.”

(Churchill, Minister of Munitions, 1917)

“It was clear that HM Government was not prepared to make an issue over this northern outpost for the sake of a few mining companies whose total output thus far was negligible.”

Speak, P., *William Speirs Bruce. Polar Explorer and Scottish Nationalist*, NMS, 2003



Churchill, 1914



Annexation 1919

Martin Conway, House of Commons Debate, 15 May 1919

“I have no interest whatsoever, prospective or present, in any of these syndicates or companies, and I know nothing whatever as to the real value or importance of any of the deposits of coal or minerals on those islands. I wish to dissociate myself altogether from the possibility of being misunderstood in this matter.

“British companies, apart from historic claims, have pegged out over three-fourth of the area of valuable ground. Possibly some combination of them might be brought about, and, as it seems to me, that combination should be brought about, both on historical and commercial grounds under the aegis of the British Government.”



Conway, nd



NORTHERN EXPLORATION COMPANY LTD.

Spitsbergen is 1,229 miles North of Great Britain.



W & A. K. Schuster, Limited, Edinburgh & London.



Aftermath

“I then went along to the Foreign Office and saw Lord Percy, Private Secretary to Lord Lansdowne, the Foreign Minister. He and I talked for two or three hours. I said I wanted England to take possession of the whole of Spitzbergen. He said, “I’ll do anything I can for you so long as it is not a *casus belli* – we can’t fight about it.

“All I know now is that if we did anything it would be a *casus belli* for us! Your name on maps certainly strikes you as being very important at the time, but it does not constitute possession, and you may depend upon that if we had had real colours to fly we would have flown them.”

Dr J. H. Salter, *Diary and Reminiscences*, 1933



To sum up

- Spitsbergen's Imperialists
- Individuals (Conway, Bruce)
- Institutions (Royal Geographical Society)
- Companies (SCTC, SMES)
- Government Institutions (Foreign Office)
- Attitudes
- Single-minded. Multi-directional. Ineffectual.