Canadian historians’ interest in the British Empire has been rekindled. The writings of such late-nineteenth-century scholars as William Kingsford emphasized Canada’s extensive links to Great Britain, whose empire was celebrated as the mightiest and most majestic the world had ever known. Such an outlook, which also characterized works of Canadian history written during the early twentieth century, steadily fell out of favour during the mid- and late-twentieth century as Canadian historians concerned themselves in ever-expanding numbers with alternative themes, including the dominion’s efforts to shed its colonial status and realize an independent national identity.

Yet recent years have witnessed a renewal of interest among Canadian historians in various aspects of the British Empire, whose global influence was greatest between the conclusion in the early nineteenth century of the Napoleonic Wars and the waging a century later of World War One. Rather than celebrating the empire in the manner of Kingsford, however, these scholars’ works offer dispassionate analyses of issues ranging from British policymakers’ attitudes toward northern North America’s indigenous peoples to displays of imperial patriotism on the part of “ordinary” Canadian citizens. By taking into account the profound importance of the British imperial phenomenon, they have enriched the study of this country’s past. Gordon L. Heath’s perceptive and painstakingly researched recent book, *A War with a Silver Lining: Canadian Protestant Churches and the South African War, 1899-1902*, makes a significant contribution to the expanding literature on Canada’s historical ties to the British Empire.

Heath’s study focuses on the attitudes of Canada’s four largest Protestant denominations—the Anglicans, the Baptists, the Methodists, and the Presbyterians—toward the South African (or Boer) War, a conflict that pitted forces from Britain and its empire against settlers of Dutch ancestry, or “Boers,” in southern Africa between 1899
and 1902. Canada, for its part, contributed several thousand soldiers to the South African War, of which approximately 250 were casualties. Canada’s involvement in the conflict threatened to upset the delicate balance on which national unity rested, as the dominion’s English-speaking citizens tended to support the British war effort, while their French-speaking counterparts, for the most part, did not.

Drawing primarily on sectarian newspapers, Heath emphasizes the Canadian Protestant churches’ staunch support for the British imperial cause throughout the Boer War. Though individual clergymen expressed misgivings regarding Britain’s aims and activities in southern Africa, their concerns were the exception that proved the rule—Canada’s major Protestant denominations, which comprised the majority of the dominion’s English-speaking population, were virtually unanimous in their support for Britain’s objectives and actions throughout the South African War. “From the onset of the conflict between Britain and the Boers in 1899 to the final peace settlement in 1902,” Heath states, “one cannot find an anti-war statement pronounced by any of the four largest Canadian Protestant denominations” (xvii).

One wonders why, and when, the attitudes of Canada’s churches toward warfare began to change. J.S. Woodsworth, a Methodist minister and prominent member of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) political party that preceded the modern-day New Democratic Party (NDP), was outspoken in his opposition to Canada’s entry into the Second World War. To be sure, Woodsworth’s anti-war views were by no means representative of the opinions of all Canadian Christians. Yet by the mid-twentieth century such sentiments had come to permeate much of mainstream Canadian Christianity, a fact that contrasts sharply with the overwhelmingly pro-war sentiments expressed by several of Canada’s largest churches in the era of the South African War. Which factors occasioned this transition, and when did it occur? Perhaps it was linked in some way to the rise within North American society during the early twentieth century of the Social Gospel movement, which eschewed aspects of orthodox Christianity in favour of efforts to create the “Kingdom of God” on earth through benevolent state interventionism. Perhaps the emergence of an anti-war sentiment as an influential
phenomenon within mainstream Canadian Christianity was attributable to the increasingly brutal character of such modern military clashes as World War One, which prompted members of various churches to reconsider their support for wars that in previous eras might have been identified as morally “just.”

Yet such questions and hypotheses fall outside of the chronological and thematic purview of Heath’s book, which is an illuminating discussion of the Canadian Protestant churches’ backing of British imperial involvement in the South African War. They are thus not criticisms but rather allusions to historical questions that are arguably in need of answering.

Denis McKim
University of Toronto
denis.mckim@utoronto.ca