

2018

The Limits of Victorian Federalism: E.A. Freeman's History of Federal Government

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Recommended Citation

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The Limits of Victorian Federalism:
E. A. Freeman's *History of Federal Government*

For Europeans in the 1860s, federalism was a familiar idea. Federations had been proposed as possible solutions for both Italian and German unification. In 1858, at Plombières, Louis Napoleon had suggested reorganizing Italy as a federation of four princely states with the pope at its head. A Germanic Confederation had existed ever since the Congress of Vienna, and after the Austrian War in 1866, Bismarck established a North German Confederation under the presidency of Prussia. Federations might play a role in other parts of the continent as well. After the Crimean War, for instance, a federation of Balkan states seemed to offer an alternative to Ottoman dominion in southeastern Europe. But federal governments were not without their problems. Across the Atlantic, the American Civil War was testing the resilience of the world's largest federation, and for a moment at least this conflict called into question the whole federalist enterprise.

English writers found the federal idea attractive in large part because it seemed to provide a solution to the problems posed by Europe's emerging nationalities. John Stuart Mill, in his *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), raised the issue in exactly this context. According to Mill, federations were most suitable in those regions where a number of small states possessed similar interests based on common language, religion, ethnicity and political institutions, but

where traditions of independence prevented them from uniting in a single consolidated state. Thus for Mill federations facilitated nation-building, the process whereby small states sharing a common nationality were amalgamated into larger entities. The advantage of a federation, Mill went on, was that it would protect the member states from hostile neighbors, particularly when those neighbors were “feudal monarchs” who resented the liberal institutions that generally characterized federal governments. Here the image of a federally united Italy facing an autocratic Austria came most readily to mind. Indeed, Mill wondered whether a unified Italy might not be a perfect candidate for federal organization, though by the time *Representative Government* came out the creation of a consolidated Italian monarchy had all but answered the question.¹

Mill’s ideas were symptomatic of the age as other writers were drawn to federalism for similar reasons.² In 1863, Edward Augustus Freeman published the first volume of his *History of Federal Government*, a study of ancient Greek federalism under the Achaean League.³ Though unknown today, Freeman was undoubtedly the most enthusiastic advocate of the federal idea that Victorian England produced. He is best considered a liberal nationalist who was drawn to federalism in large part because it spoke to the problems posed by continental nationalism.⁴ He regarded nationality as a linguistic and racial category, and he anticipated the day when large states, each representing the will of a single sovereign nation, would define the European state system. He endorsed nationalist movements in Italy, Germany and the Balkans, and opposed the Austrian and Ottoman empires on the grounds that they violated the principles of nationality and popular sovereignty. To help build these new nation-states, Freeman pointed to federalism, arguing that federations would enable populations of similar nationality to achieve independence, cohesion and security, while at the same time establishing liberal governments in which decentralization would curb the exercise of power.

I

Freeman's *History of Federal Government* was the first—and, as it turned out, the only—installment of a much larger work. His original intention was to write four volumes. Ancient Greek federalism under the Achaean League, the Swiss Confederation from the thirteenth century to the present day, the United Provinces from their independence to the French Revolution, and the development of federal government in the United States were to have a volume each. But in the event, Freeman wrote only the first. Though it was never completed as originally intended, the *History of Federal Government* was still a substantial work, combining an introductory chapter on federalism in general with a lengthy discussion of the Achaean League and other Greek attempts at federation. In 1893, J. B. Bury oversaw a new edition of the book, adding to the original text a few fragments found among Freeman's papers.

Freeman's federalism—the way he defined it and the advantages he attached to it—spoke directly to contemporary European problems. Indeed, the numerous references to current events that peppered the *History of Federal Government* made it clear that present-day concerns were never far from his mind as he wrote the book. The American Civil War alone, he thought, had made the “origin” and “destiny” of federalism “the most interesting of all political problems.”⁵ But more than America, it was Europe he was contemplating: for in essence, federalism was Freeman's response to the rise of nationalism, especially in Italy and the Balkans, the two areas of Europe most pressingly in need of redefinition. It was not accidental that Freeman began to write his *History of Federal Government* during the Crimean War, a conflict that placed the future of the Italian and the Balkan nations before the public. Federations, he suggested, would organize these emerging nationalities into viable political units, establish peace and stability in two troubled re-

gions, guarantee political and intellectual progress, and promote the cause of freedom. As a rule, the Victorians favored large political units and Freeman was no exception. Only states of considerable size, they believed, would have the resources to support viable economies, provide for defense and play a stabilizing role in the balance of power. Most Victorian liberals, therefore, saw nationalism as a force leading to the creation of large nation-states, whether in Germany, Italy or the Balkans. The problem confronting these liberal nationalists was how to overcome the strong divisions that stood in the way of consolidation, and federalism seemed to provide the answer because of its respect for local customs and allegiances.

In presenting federal ideas in a favorable light, Freeman was pursuing goals that were actually more conventional and limited than might at first appear. He accepted the European state system as it functioned in his own day: an arrangement of sovereign states, each independent, recognizing no higher authority and existing in competition with one another. He did not regard federalism as an alternative to this system, as some kind of supranational organization regulating relations between states and thus calling on its members to surrender a degree of their autonomy.⁶ He was not, in other words, a visionary dreaming of a federally united Europe. By the turn of the century, some English federalists would begin to think in these terms, but Freeman clearly did not. As a mid-Victorian liberal, he thought within prevailing assumptions and saw no need to replace the existing system with something new. Indeed, for him federalism was a way to make this system work more smoothly by reconstructing the messy parts of Europe—Italy, Germany, the Balkans, the Habsburg lands—on the basis of large, stable states. Nor did Freeman regard federalism as a solution to the constitutional problems that arose in Britain in the 1880s and 1890s over Irish home rule and imperial federation.⁷ Having derived his federalist principles from a continental context, he was reluctant to apply them to Britain. Because he saw federation as a means to build or preserve large states,

he considered it applicable to those areas where large states did not exist. But such was not the case with Britain. To create a federal Britain by sharing sovereignty with Ireland or the colonies would only reverse the process of nation-building and weaken an already strong unitary state.

Freeman began his *History* with a definition: "A Federal Commonwealth," he wrote, "...in its perfect form, is one which forms a single state in its relations to other nations, but which consists of many states with regard to its internal government."⁸ Such an arrangement, he continued, usually arose when a number of smaller states united together and delegated authority to a central government, which then presided over their combined affairs. In joining a federation, however, member states did not relinquish all their former independence, but rather retained absolute sovereignty over their own internal affairs: they could determine their own laws and the forms of their own constitutions. In a similar manner, the central government, while not permitted to interfere in the internal affairs of the member states, was absolutely sovereign in those matters affecting the entire federation, especially its relationship with the outside world. "The making of peace and war, the sending and receiving of ambassadors," Freeman wrote, "generally all that comes within the department of International Law, will be reserved wholly to the central power. Indeed, the very existence of the several members of the Union will be diplomatically unknown to foreign nations, which will never be called upon to deal with any power except the Central Government."⁹

In an effort to categorize this composite type of government, Freeman rejected the normal classification of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. A federal government, he pointed out, could actually fall into any one of these classes since a union of democracies, aristocracies, or even monarchies was each theoretically possible. Instead of using these conventional categories, Freeman proposed to divide governments by size into small or large states, a taxonomy that he believed would

reveal the particular advantage of a federal system. As he explained: “A Federal Government is most likely to be formed when the question arises whether several small states shall remain perfectly independent, or shall be consolidated into a single great state. A Federal tie harmonizes the two contending principles by reconciling a certain amount of union with a certain amount of independence. A Federal Government then is a mean between the system of large states and the system of small states.”¹⁰ These small and large states, for Freeman, were also historically specific. The small state, which must be small enough for all its citizens to gather in one place for political purposes, had reached perfection in the independent cities of ancient Greece. The large state, which must be so large that the distances between citizens made such direct participation in politics impossible, had achieved perfection in the monarchies of modern Europe.¹¹ A federal state was then a compromise between past and present: because it permitted small states to retain much of their independence while grouping them in larger political units, it would at its best combine the political freedom of the Greek city with the stability of the large European monarchy.

The greatest advantage of the small state was its ability to educate its citizens. By encouraging them to participate in politics, the ancient Greek city gave its residents an unprecedented opportunity to learn the skills and responsibilities of governing. A small state like Athens, Freeman declared with Victorian confidence, provided all its citizens with the kind of political education that the contemporary House of Commons gave to its several hundred members.¹² The result was a people of the highest political sophistication. Praising in this way the participatory politics of the ancient city state, Freeman came forward as an enthusiast for Athenian democracy. No other political system “made a greater number of citizens fit to use power...,” he maintained: “...The Athenian citizen, by constantly hearing questions of foreign policy and domestic administration freely argued by the greatest orators that the world ever saw, received a political education which nothing else in the

history of mankind has ever been found to equal.” Only in a city like Athens, he concluded, would “the average of political knowledge, and indeed of general intelligence of every kind, be so high...”¹³ But the small state had its drawbacks as well. The restricted size of the political field tended to intensify rivalries and create lasting political divisions. The absence of any overarching authority to which neighboring states could appeal for justice made it all but inevitable that disputes between them would be settled through war. Vicious internal strife and chronic warfare ensured that the life of the small state would be short and its history would be one of disorder and turmoil.¹⁴

Providing peace and stability, however, was exactly what Freeman thought the large modern kingdom did best. A central government, presiding over numerous cities and treating each of its subjects impartially, would ensure that local disagreements were settled peacefully, thereby avoiding the constant warfare that had plagued the ancient city states.¹⁵ When wars did break out between large states, they would also tend to be less disruptive and less costly than the wars between either ancient or modern cities. “A happily situated ... nation may wage war after war, and spend nothing except its treasures and the blood of the soldiers actually engaged,” Freeman wrote with the optimism of one who had not yet experienced twentieth-century war: “The wars which we can ourselves remember, the Russian War of 1854–6 and the Lombard campaign of 1859, have been mere child’s play compared to the great internal wars either of Greece or of Germany. The scale of the powers engaged of course caused a tremendous loss of life among actual combatants, but the general amount of misery inflicted on the world was trifling in proportion to what was caused either by the Peloponnesian War or by the War of Thirty Years.”¹⁶ But large modern kingdoms paid a price for this peace and stability. More orderly than the ancient Greek cities, they were less able to engage their citizens politically, even when they were constitutional monarchies. Because of their size, these large states were inevitably governed by representative assem-

blies, a practice which limited the involvement of most citizens to the election of those who would represent them. Such a system, Freeman argued, removed the average citizen from the political process and contributed to his political debasement. Electors were often “ignorant and careless of public affairs.” They often cast their votes “blindly, recklessly, and corruptly.” Some did not even bother to vote, while others sold their votes. “Ignorance, carelessness, and corruption”—these, Freeman concluded, were the shortcomings of large-scale representative government.¹⁷

Forced to choose between the vital but turbulent politics of the city state and the orderly but disengaged politics of the large monarchy, Freeman knew where his preference lay. The Greek city, he readily admitted, was a thing of the past and could not be recalled. The large monarchy, with its representative institutions, was the great Teutonic contribution to politics and it had brought a well needed stability to much of Europe. But the beauty of the federation, which combined the best of both the small and large state, was that one did not have to choose. A federal government, Freeman argued, would guarantee stability almost as effectively as a monarchy because, like the monarchy, it had the power to adjudicate peacefully any disputes that arose among its constituents.¹⁸ A federal government would educate its citizens almost as effectively as a city state because the principle of decentralization, which defined the federation, would foster a genuine respect for traditions of local self-government—and, for Freeman, nothing was more likely to improve citizens politically than the experience of governing themselves. In a federation, he wrote, “republican habits and feelings will cause appeals to the people to be far more common and far more direct than is usual in a monarchic state. Political meetings and regularly organized Conventions will be far more common and far more influential.” Above all, the principal that each member state should manage its own affairs without interference from above would naturally ensure that these states grant a large amount of municipal lib-

erty to their own counties, cities and towns. “In the New England States,” Freeman noted, “where the true Federal model is best carried out, local Self-Government seems to have reached its fullest development.” There, amid the excitement of the New England town meeting, citizens received a kind of political education that was unavailable in the centralized monarchies of contemporary Europe.¹⁹

Freeman’s *History of Federal Government* was the most sophisticated treatment of its subject to appear in England during the nineteenth century and it revealed the parameters that shaped most Victorian thinking about federalism.²⁰ For Freeman, as for Mill and others, federation was a process of building nations, not of breaking them apart, and it was applicable therefore only to those areas where large states were lacking. The goal of federation was to achieve international stability within the existing state system and domestic freedom based on local self-government. As Freeman’s comments on war made clear, he did not envision a world free of conflict, but rather a system of independent states where the disruption, frequency and cost of war was lessened because the states involved were large. As his comments on New England made clear, he approved of federal government because it encouraged a decentralized but orderly democracy. Such was Freeman’s understanding of federalism, and his discussion of it placed him in the forefront of progressive thinking in England. In his *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill had evaluated government on the same grounds as Freeman. For Mill, as for Freeman, the purpose of government was to foster “virtue and intelligence” among the governed and ancient Athens was the one place where this had been done most effectively. The experience of Athenian democracy, Mill wrote, anticipating Freeman, “raised the intellectual standard of an average Athenian citizen far beyond anything of which there is yet an example in any other mass of men, ancient or modern. The proofs of this are apparent in every page of our great historian of Greece...” The reference to George Grote’s *History of Greece* (1846–1856) is instructive: for by the mid-nineteenth

century, ancient Athens had become a litmus test for attitudes to democracy, and Grote's vindication of Athenian democracy, which Freeman and Mill both praised, was one of the great works of Victorian radicalism.²¹

2

Freeman chose to illustrate the advantages of federalism for nation-building by turning to antiquity and writing a history of the Achaean League, a confederation of Greek cities whose leader, Aratus, united the Greeks and drove the Macedonians from the Peloponnese. That Freeman should have looked to ancient Greece was not surprising. The Victorians, after all, were immersed in the classical past. But they did not consider all periods equal, preferring the Athens of Plato and Thucydides to the later periods. Freeman, however, saw things differently. He was drawn to later Greek history precisely because of its modernity: "... it is the history of a complex political world, in which single cities, monarchies, and Federations, all play their part, just as they do in the European history of later times."²² As Freeman told the story of the Achaean League, he drew an explicit parallel between past and present: the League's rise was nothing less than a "national struggle of Greece against Macedonia" that resembled the campaigns for Italian unification, which he considered "the most glorious event of our own day."²³ Macedonia was a foreign power holding the Greeks in subjection, much as Austria had dominated Italy, and the League stood for unification. The lessons of ancient Greece were many. Athens gave the world philosophy, art, poetry. The Achaean League gave the world a different lesson: how to unite, throw off the oppressor, and achieve national freedom. "For a hundred and forty years," Freeman concluded, "...the League had given to a larger portion of Greece than any previous age had seen, a measure of freedom, unity, and general good government, which may well atone for the lack of the dazzling glory of the old

Athenian Democracy. It was no slight achievement to weld together so many cities into an Union which strengthened them against foreign Kings and Senates, and which yet preserved to them that internal independence which was so dear to the Hellenic mind.”²⁴

If, as Freeman wanted us to believe, the Achaean League fought the war of Greek independence, then Aratus was its Cavour: he was “devoted to the cause of freedom,” to extending “the area of free Greece,” and the League under his leadership became “a great Pan-hellenic power, the centre of Grecian freedom, the foe of Tyrants and the refuge of the oppressed.”²⁵ But if Aratus achieved independence and unity, he did so at a cost. Sparta stood in the way of Greek unification. Just as Cavour would cede Nice and Savoy to France in order to secure Louis Napoleon’s support in the campaign against Austria, so Aratus restored Corinth to Macedonia as the price of Macedonian aid in the war against Sparta. Freeman drew out the parallel between the two rulers:

There is indeed much likeness in the character and career of the two men; each sought the noblest of ends, but neither was so scrupulous as strict morality could wish as to the means by which those ends were to be compassed. Each was, in his own age, unrivalled for parliamentary and diplomatic skill; each indulged in the same dark and crooked policy.... But the cession of Akrokorinthos was a deeper sin against freedom than the cession of Savoy and Nizza. Both the Achaian and the Italian statesman surrendered a portion of the land which he had saved into the hands of a foreign despot; one surrendered his own ancestral province, the other surrendered the scene of his own most glorious exploit. Each deed was equally the betrayal of a trust, the narrowing of the area of freedom.²⁶

So the parallel was imperfect—Freeman preferred Cavour to Aratus, finding Cavour’s crime less odious—but that was hardly the point. As an example of political rhetoric, Freeman’s juxtaposition of past and

present, of Aratus and Cavour, served to establish ancient Greek federalism and the Achaean League as a paradigm for modern nation-building.

Freeman intended his work as a piece of scholarship and in all fairness we ought to evaluate it as a contribution to classical historiography, not as a tract for the times. But scattered among the mind-numbing details that made up his description of the Achaean constitution were observations suggesting that he intended his work to speak to contemporary events. For example, his description of the League's constitution emphasized its modern and liberal attributes, rendering it a suitable model for nineteenth-century nation-building. It was "strictly Federal" according to his definition: each city was independent regarding its internal affairs, a federal government determined relations with other states, and both city and federal governments were "democratic."²⁷ Freeman's frequent comparisons of the Achaean and British constitutions, combined with his use of Victorian terminology, only reinforced the present-mindedness of his analysis. The Achaean federal assembly, he maintained, resembled the House of Commons, its magistrates acted as "Ministers" comprising a "Cabinet," and there was a "Government" and an "Opposition."²⁸ His conclusion only perpetuated the confusion of past and present: "Altogether the general practical working of the Achaian system was a remarkable advance in the direction of modern constitutional government. And it especially resembles our own system in leaving to usage, to the discretion of particular persons and Assemblies, and to the natural working of circumstances, much which nations of a more theoretical turn of mind might have sought to rule by positive law."²⁹ Freeman's ancient Greeks were Burkeans, eschewing abstract design and allowing precedence and circumstances to direct change, and their respect for constitutional procedures was English at heart.

Having asserted the suitability of the Achaean League as a model for contemporary nation-building, Freeman applied it to those areas in

Europe where nationalism was forcing change: Italy, Greece, and the Balkans generally. Like so many English liberals, Freeman had been a longtime advocate of Italian nationality. As we have seen, Cavour assumed heroic proportions in his *Federal Government* as the statesman who unified Italy by liberating it from Austrian domination. But Italy in fact troubled Freeman because events there had not gone quite as he thought they should. He had always hoped that Italian unification would result in a federation rather than in a single consolidated monarchy. The conditions for federal government were all present: “The historic greatness of her cities, the wide diversities among her several provinces, the difference in feelings, manners, and even language, between Sicily, Rome, Tuscany, Venice, and Piedmont, all pointed to a Federal Union as the natural form for Italian freedom to assume. It seemed, on every ground, to be the form of unity under which Italy might look for the highest amount of internal prosperity and contentment.”³⁰ But the Italians had decided otherwise, and with the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy all prospects for an Italian federation had vanished.

Freeman’s approach to Italy demonstrated the limitations of his historical rhetoric. By associating Aratus with Cavour, he had hoped to establish Achaean federalism as a viable model for nation-building. But this rhetorical strategy contained a flaw. The juxtaposition of Cavour and Aratus, rather than legitimating the Achaeans, could just as easily serve to discredit Cavour’s achievement. Whereas Aratus had gathered the Greek cities into a federation, Cavour delivered the Italian states to Victor Emanuel in the form of a consolidated monarchy. Cavour, it turned out, was not the kind of nation-builder that Freeman thought he was, and Italian unification had not followed the course that Freeman had marked out for it. In 1857, he had warned that Italian unification should not come about through the expansion of Piedmont because that would only undermine local liberties and lead to excessive centralization: “...No lover of Italy could endure to see Milan, and Venice, and Florence, and the Eternal City itself sink into provincial

dependencies of the Savoyard.”³¹ And yet this was exactly what had happened. Even after unification was complete, Freeman continued to urge that Italy should pursue federal policies in order to avoid becoming centralized along French lines: “...It is not too late to say that the true policy of the Italian Kingdom will be to approach as near to the Federal type as a Consolidated state can approach. It should keep as far as possible from the deadening system of French centralization; it should give every province, every city, every district, the greatest amount of local independence consistent with the common national action of the whole realm. Naples and Florence and Milan must not be allowed for a moment to feel themselves in bondage to an upstart rival like Turin. It is only by establishing perfect equality, and therefore perfect local independence, through every corner of his realm that the King of Piedmont can grow into a true King of Italy....”³²

Greece was another troubled region that Freeman thought would have benefited from federal government. Late in life he described himself as a philhellene of fifty years, and throughout his career he was as passionate for the liberation of Greece as he was for the unification of Italy.³³ But Greece had its problems as well: critics frequently accused the state of being one of the worst governed in Europe. Freeman admitted the charge, but placed much of the blame for this condition on interference by the great powers. Had Greece been left alone, he claimed, it would have developed into a federation: “Now all history tells me that a people winning its independence naturally adopts as its constitution the form of a Federal Republic. Instances two thousand years apart from each other all preach the same lesson. Achaia, Switzerland, Holland, America, all followed the same invariable impulse.” Conditions in Greece, he continued, were conducive to federation: The country contained many geographically isolated communities that called out for local independence. The Ottomans had allowed the Greeks to retain “rude forms of municipality and self-government,” which could have provided the basis for a federal arrangement. A federal government

would have accommodated the many minorities that fell within the borders of Greece: Albanians, Turks, Slavs, Wallachs, Jews. But instead of allowing Greece to develop in a federal direction, the great powers imposed a Bavarian monarchy which ignored these strong tendencies toward federation and established a centralized bureaucracy. A monarchy may have been necessary, but if Greece were to be governed well it should have been a monarchy that would have restored as much federal freedom as was consistent with a strong central authority.³⁴

But Freeman was thinking about the Balkans in general more than about Italy or Greece. His interest in federal government had coalesced around the time of the Crimean War, as the Russian advance into Wallachia and Moldavia, which forced the Ottomans to withdraw from the two principalities, raised the possibility of a new political arrangement in southeastern Europe. Freeman had always disliked the Ottomans: they were oppressors, the traditional enemy of Christian civilization, an Asian power encamped on European soil that would never assimilate to the West and therefore ought to go.³⁵ In 1855, as the war drew to a close, he delivered a set of lectures on the *History and Conquests of the Saracens* that provided a historical justification for their removal. For Freeman, East and West had precise geographical boundaries. All lands that had fallen under the sway of either the Roman or Byzantine empires he considered European: their inhabitants had been Christian, had participated in Greco-Roman civilization, had at one time spoken either Greek or Latin, and had adhered to western political principles such as the rule of law. But the advance of Islam had eroded the edges of this European civilization. The Moorish conquest of Spain and the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans were phases of a single movement that had taken from Europe lands that were rightfully its own. The burden of history, as Freeman felt it, was to reclaim Europe for itself and for Christianity. The ejection of the Moors from Spain had started the process and the liberation of the Balkans must now complete it.³⁶ The question was how to accomplish this feat, and here federalism sup-

plied the answer. Just as the Achaean League had united the Greeks and given them the strength to defeat the Macedonians, so a Balkan federation would provide the nations of southeastern Europe with the means to achieve their liberation. Searching for the common ground on which to build the federation, Freeman pointed to history and religion. It would be a federation of monarchies—Balkan political traditions were not republican—united by Orthodox Christianity, a common sense of having suffered for centuries at the hands of the Ottomans, and a reverence for the Byzantine Empire.³⁷

As this appreciation of Europe's Byzantine past suggests, Freeman's *History of Federal Government* was a very philhellenic work. It told the story of a heroic moment in Greek history, an early attempt to forge a Greek nation. It located the origin of the federal idea in the Greek past, appealed to the robust democracy of the Greek city-state as a remedy against excessive centralization, and pointed to the achievements of the Achaean League in order to demonstrate the value of federations for nation-building. As such it was an effective example of political rhetoric, making its case by appealing to ancient Greece, a civilization that enjoyed a privileged position in Victorian culture. The *History of Federal Government* was also a book with a purpose, as Freeman applied his federal thinking to those parts of Europe where the emergence of nationalism was making itself felt. He believed that Italy and Greece would have benefited from federal organization, and he urged the creation of a Balkan federation, hoping it would restore Europe by rescuing the region from Ottoman domination.

3

Freeman never completed the *History of Federal Government*. The final three volumes languished, un-researched and unwritten. But his interest in federalism persisted all the same. He welcomed the formation of a unified Germany, seeing it as an interesting example of a fed-

eration of monarchies, and when the Eastern Question erupted in violence in the 1870s, he once again thought of applying the federal model to the Balkans.³⁸ But when spokesmen for Irish home rule and imperial federation turned federalism into a domestic issue, he was less than enthusiastic. It was only natural that Freeman, an advocate of the rights of nationality in other parts of Europe, would be drawn to embrace home rule for Ireland, especially after Gladstone took up the cause.³⁹ He also saw the attraction of creating stronger ties between Britain and its English-speaking colonies, including its former possession, the United States.⁴⁰ But no matter how sympathetic he was to the cause of home rule, no matter how strong his desire to unite the Anglophone world, he seriously doubted whether the constitutional relationship between either Great Britain and Ireland or Great Britain and its colonies could be established successfully on a federal basis. Federations, he argued, repeating what he had already said in his *History of Federal Government*, were only suitable in certain circumstances. Whereas they had a role to play whenever a number of small states were amalgamating into a larger one, they were unlikely to work when a large state was breaking apart. This had been the lesson of history—"that the Federal relation is in its place when it tries to unite and not when it tries to disunite"⁴¹—and he pointed to the formation of the Swiss and American federations as examples. In both cases, he noted, federalism had initiated a process of amalgamation that over time would probably result in consolidated states.⁴²

Freeman then applied this lesson to home rule. A truly federal solution to the Irish problem would require Britain and Ireland each to surrender a degree of sovereignty to a federal government that would then preside over their common affairs. A more thorough federalism would go even further: it would call for the establishment of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales as autonomous states, which would then surrender sovereignty to a federal parliament. But for Freeman such a solution was unrealistic because it would reverse the direction toward greater

consolidation in which federations historically proceeded.⁴³ The fact was, he concluded, Ireland was a British dependency, and the only practical way for it to achieve home rule would be for Britain to delegate it certain sovereign powers. Such a procedure would grant Ireland greater autonomy, but the relationship between the two countries would not be federal since Ireland would remain a dependency.⁴⁴ A federal arrangement for the empire was equally unworkable, and for similar reasons. The colonies, he observed, like Ireland, were dependencies. For Britain to share sovereignty with them in a federation would require Britain to relinquish certain powers, most importantly control over foreign affairs, to a federal government. It was one thing for a number of small states to do this because in the long run they would gain from the added strength that federation would bring. But for a large, consolidated state like Britain to lose its independence by sharing sovereignty with its dependencies was historically unprecedented: “The proposal that a ruling state ... should come down from its position of empire, and enter into terms of equal confederation with its subject communities, is a very remarkable proposal, and one which perhaps never before had been made in the history of the world.”⁴⁵

Freeman’s reluctance to extend federal ties to Ireland or the empire underscores the limitations of his federalist thinking, especially in its practical application. A reading of the *History of Federal Government* leaves the unmistakable impression that he admired federations most of all because of their military potential, their ability to bring fragmented regions together in a concerted effort to throw off a common oppressor. His book’s projected volumes, had he written them, would have all told stories of national liberation: the Dutch and Swiss defending themselves against Habsburg power, the American colonies battling for independence. Freeman was preoccupied with nation-building, with organizing Europe into large states that would bring peace and stability to the continent while extending its frontiers. The thought of using federations to create still larger entities out of the fully-formed states of Europe was

more ambitious than he ever intended. Even the federation's professed ability to promote liberal government took second place to its military capabilities. A suspicion of centralized authority may have troubled Victorian liberals, especially as the French Second Empire came to embody their worst fears. But it is hard to comprehend how a federation of Balkan monarchies would have extended the political benefits of the small New England town to that troubled region. Far easier to see how it would have united the Balkan nations in an offensive league aimed at putting an end to Ottoman domination.

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Notes

- 1 *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, edited by J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991), 19: 553, 560.
- 2 The literature on federalist thinking in nineteenth-century England is quite extensive. As the following titles suggest, most historians of the subject place it in the context of either Irish home rule or imperial federation. No one, as far as I am aware, has seen English federalism in the mid-Victorian period as a response to the nationalities question on the continent. I have found the following most insightful: Michael Burgess, “Empire, Ireland and Europe: A Century of British Federal Ideas,” *Federalism and Federation in Western Europe*, edited by Michael Burgess (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 127–152. John Kendle, *Ireland and the Federal Solution: The Debate over the United Kingdom Constitution, 1870–1921* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989). *The Federal Idea*, Volume 1, *The History of Federalism from Enlightenment to 1945*, edited by Andrea Bosco (London: Lothian Foundation Press, 1991), particularly the essays by John Pinder, George Boyce and Michael Burgess. John Kendle, *Federal Britain: A History* (London: Routledge, 1997). This last book by John Kendle is the best general survey of the subject.
- 3 Edward A. Freeman, *History of Federal Government, from the Foundation of the Achaian League to the Disruption of the United States* (London: Macmillan, 1863).
- 4 W. R. W. Stephens, *The Life and Letters of Edward A. Freeman* (London: Macmillan, 1895). J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 155–228. Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

- ⁵ Edward A. Freeman, *History of Federal Government in Greece and Italy*, second edition, edited by J. B. Bury (London: Macmillan, 1893), 69.
- ⁶ There is a tendency among modern-day federalists to present the Victorians as though they should have been sympathetic to the idea of a federal Europe. See for example John Pinder, “The Federal Idea and the British Liberal Tradition,” *The Federal Idea*, 99–118.
- ⁷ Some historians of British federalism have seemed surprised, even disappointed, that Freeman was not prepared to apply his federalist principles to Britain. John Kendle, for example, writes: “It was clear that writers such as John Stuart Mill, Edward Freeman, James Bryce ... were all thoroughly familiar with the federal idea and they provided sound expositions of its nature and operation but not one of them was prepared to push the boundaries of theoretical discussion and explore its possibilities for the British state.” (*Federal Britain*, 172.) Kendle, however, has missed the important point that Freeman, Acton and Bryce were all thinking about continental, not British, problems when they first formulated their views on federalism.
- ⁸ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 7.
- ⁹ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 2–3.
- ¹⁰ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 12–13.
- ¹¹ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 13–14.
- ¹² Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 30–31.
- ¹³ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 29, 32, 37.
- ¹⁴ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 42–44, 46–48.
- ¹⁵ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 61–62.

- 22 Freeman and Victorian Federalism
- ¹⁶ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 62–63.
- ¹⁷ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 64–65.
- ¹⁸ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 67–68, 77–80.
- ¹⁹ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 81, 82.
- ²⁰ Henry Sidgwick, for example, who lectured on federalism in the 1880s and 1890s, followed quite closely Freeman’s line of argument. See Henry Sidgwick, *The Development of European Polity* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 135–140.
- ²¹ *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 19: 390, 411. For Grote and the controversy over Athens, see Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 187–234. For Freeman’s appreciation of Grote as the “zealous and fervent champion of the parent state of justice and liberty,—the great Democracy of Athens,” see Edward A. Freeman, “Grote’s *History of Greece*,” *North British Review*, American edition, 25 (May 1856): 75.
- ²² Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 176.
- ²³ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 180–181.
- ²⁴ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 553–554.
- ²⁵ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 289, 303.
- ²⁶ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 381.
- ²⁷ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 199, 198.
- ²⁸ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 209, 214–216.
- ²⁹ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 218.
- ³⁰ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 616.

- ³¹ Edward A. Freeman, "Ancient Greece and Mediæval Italy," *Oxford Essays* (London: J. W. Parker, 1857), 167.
- ³² Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 617.
- ³³ Edward A. Freeman, "A Review of My Opinions," *The Forum*, 13 (April 1892): 148–149.
- ³⁴ Edward A. Freeman, "What Are the Greeks?" *The Spectator*, 27 (16 December 1854): 1333–1334. Edward A. Freeman, "The Greek Kingdom and the Greek People," *Edinburgh Review*, 103 (April 1856): 402, 416. Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 554–555.
- ³⁵ For the development of Freeman's opposition to the Ottomans and his support for Balkan nationalism, see the letters that he wrote under the following headings to the editor of the *Spectator*: "Russians, Turks, Greeks, Slaves, and Danes," *The Spectator*, 26 (29 October 1853): 1037–1038. "The Revolt in Epirus," *The Spectator*, 27 (25 March 1854): 337–338. "What Are the Greeks?" *The Spectator*, 27 (2 December 1854): 1259–1260. "What Are the Greeks?" *The Spectator*, 27 (16 December 1854): 1333–1334. "Peace or War," *The Spectator*, 28 (21 April 1855): 407–408. "States and Nations," *The Spectator*, 28 (25 August 1855): 883–884.
- ³⁶ Edward A. Freeman, *The History and Conquests of the Saracens*, third edition (London: Macmillan, 1877), 9–11, 14–15, 17–18, 106–109, 138–139, 153–155. For Freeman's general understanding of the region's history, see: "Greece during the Macedonian Period," *North British Review*, American edition, 21 (August 1854): 222–236. "Finlay on the Byzantine Empire," *North British Review*, 22 (February 1855): 343–375. "Mahometanism in the East and West," *North British Review*, American edition, 23 (August 1855): 242–259. "Alexander the Great," *Edinburgh Review*, American edition, 105 (April 1857): 159–177. "The Eastern Church," *Edinburgh Review*, American edition, 107 (April 1858): 165–183.

- ³⁷ Freeman, *Federal Government*, second edition, 555–556. On a number of occasions in the 1850s, Freeman called for the creation of a Balkan federation. See, for example: “Russians, Turks, Greeks, Slaves, and Danes,” *The Spectator*, 26 (29 October 1853): 1038. “The Greek Kingdom and the Greek People,” *Edinburgh Review*, 103 (April 1856): 388. “Montenegro,” *The Spectator*, 31 (29 May 1858): 574.
- ³⁸ For Freeman’s interest in unified Germany as a federation of monarchies, see Stephens, *Life and Letters*, 2: 6. For the development of his thinking on the applicability of federalism to the Balkans, see: “The True Eastern Question,” *Fortnightly Review*, 24 (December 1875): 768–769. “The Geographical Aspect of the Eastern Question,” *Fortnightly Review*, 27 (January 1877): 85–87. “The Austrian Power,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 102 (July 1880): 45. “The Position of the Austrian Power in Southeastern Europe,” *The Contemporary Review*, 41 (May 1882): 738, 740–741, 748.
- ³⁹ Edward A. Freeman, “Federalism and Home Rule,” *Fortnightly Review*, 22 (August 1874): 204, 206–210, 215. Edward A. Freeman, “Some Aspects of Home Rule,” *Contemporary Review*, 49 (February 1886): 153–158.
- ⁴⁰ Edward A. Freeman, “Imperial Federation,” *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 51 (April 1885): 430, 444–445. Edward A. Freeman, *Greater Greece and Greater Britain, and George Washington, the Expander of England: Two Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 62–103.
- ⁴¹ Freeman, “Federalism and Home Rule,” 214.
- ⁴² Edward A. Freeman, “The Growth of Commonwealths,” *Fortnightly Review*, 22 (October 1873): 454–455. See also 443–445 and 448–449.

- 43 Freeman, "Federalism and Home Rule," 210–214. Edward A. Freeman, "Prospects of Home Rule," *Fortnightly Review*, 46 (September 1886): 325–326.
- 44 Freeman, "Federalism and Home Rule," 204–205, 209. Freeman, "Prospects of Home Rule," 318–324, 327–328.
- 45 Freeman, "Imperial Federation," 436, 439–441.