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*Classics*


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# The Torch Bearer and the Tutor: Prevalent attitudes towards the Roman Empire in Imperial Britain

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*How do people in power use history to shape current policy? How does current policy influence conceptions of history? Examining these questions, this paper addresses how British imperialists during the late 19th and early 20th centuries redefined their ideas about the classical Roman Empire to fit their (imperialist) ideologies, and how British imperial policy helped set the agenda for research on classical history. Specifically, a shift in attitude towards the Roman Empire occurred in the late Victorian era. Until the mid 19th century, British historians viewed Roman imperialism as despotic. However, as Britain's imperialist ambitions grew, historians began to glorify Imperial Rome and sought to forge a stronger historical link between the two civilizations. Politicians, meanwhile, began to actively partake in classical studies, influencing research and stressing the relevance of studying Rome. By the early 20th century, a coherent ideology had appeared: Britain was the heir to Rome and, learning from its predecessor's mistakes, it would carry forward the "torch of civilization."*

On the cover of Niall Ferguson's recent bestseller *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* is a photograph of two American tanks in front of the Colosseum in Rome. The book's title indicates the continuing relevance of imperialism to the modern world, but the choice of the cover photograph is intriguing. What does the Colosseum, the gladiatorial arena of the ancient Romans, have to do with the notion of an American Empire?

Though over fifteen centuries have passed since the fall of Rome and its western provinces to barbarian hordes, people continue to associate imperialism with the ancient Roman Empire. Before the last two centuries a number of Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and even European empires have risen and fallen, but the

memory of Rome persists. And America is not the only country whose activities have evoked parallels with Rome; Europe's connection is even stronger, and the governments of France, Germany, Russia, and Italy have all actively drawn upon the "Roman image" at different times<sup>1</sup>.

In the British Empire, too, the "Roman image" was important. Just as Ferguson now compares the United States to Rome in *Colossus*, British historians during the Victorian and Edwardian periods drew parallels between their Empire and the Caesars'. But Rome had a greater impact on nineteenth and early twentieth century British elites than it does on Americans today. One reason for this, according to Richard Hingley, author of *Roman Offi-*

*cers and English Gentlemen*, is that "Greek and Roman authors talked in the first person to the English Gentleman."<sup>2</sup> In other words, educated Englishmen often had, from their schooling, an intimate knowledge of classical literature and ancient history. Winston Churchill is a good example. A recent paper examines the influence of the historian Edward Gibbon on Churchill and relates how he, as a youth, "rode triumphantly" through Gibbon's voluminous *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* "from end to end."<sup>3</sup> The tome affected the views of the future Prime Minister throughout his life.

Since the history of ancient Rome seems to have influenced the British elites

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1. Hingley 157

2. Ibid 157

3. Quinault 317

who decided imperial policy, their interpretations of classical sources and their views on classical Rome may have had far-reaching consequences. What, therefore, was the prevalent British attitude towards the Roman Empire during the Imperial Era? And how was this attitude significant in terms of its effect on policy and history?

The issue is more complex than it first appears. First of all, views on ancient Rome in Britain were neither uniform or static. Over the course of the nineteenth century they evolved from a dismissal of the Roman Empire as a despotic regime to an “imperial discourse”, as Hingley calls it, that largely saw Rome in a positive light through the lens of Victorian virtues such as “civilization” and “progress.”<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the prevalent attitude among British elites during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, when this discourse reached the height of its relevance and authority, did not envision Rome as a simple analogue to the British Empire. Rather, Rome represented to them a less advanced predecessor empire that had passed on the torch of imperialism to Britain. The Roman Empire was an historical example, and England could benefit from studying its virtues as well as avoiding the vices that led to its downfall. In this context, the notion of Rome’s “decline and fall” held immense importance for the future of the British Empire.

Additionally, the influence of Roman history on British imperialism was a circular process. Just as British statesmen and academics sought to apply the lessons of classical Rome to current policy, prevalent attitudes about imperialism helped shape the development of Roman history and Roman archaeology. As Hingley shows in his book, a strong association existed between certain imperial administrators and scholars of classical History, such as Francis Haverfield, W.T. Arnold, Lord Cromer, and Stanley Baldwin, and these relationships helped facilitate the influence of one discipline on the other. This paper seeks to consider the impact of classical Rome

4. Seeley 188

on British imperialism by exploring the development and nature of the “imperial discourse” in the early twentieth century and briefly examining its significance to Britain’s imperial policy as well as Roman history and archaeology.

### The Evolution of the “Roman Example”

“Historians seldom praise the Roman Empire,” reads the opening sentence of the influential archaeologist Francis Haverfield’s *Romanization of Roman Britain*, originally a speech given in 1905<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, though many late eighteenth century and nineteenth century British historians respected the Roman Republic, holding it “in honour for its freedom,”<sup>6</sup> they regarded the Empire that followed and the concept of imperialism with distaste, often associating it with the perceived despotism of rulers such as Louis XIV and Napoleon Bonaparte of France<sup>7</sup>. However, over the course of the nineteenth century, as British international policy began to resemble that of an empire, this aversion to Imperial Rome changed into an acceptance of imperialism but criticism of particular aspects of the Roman variety. By the late Victorian period, what remained of this restrained criticism had turned into an outright appreciation for the classical Roman Empire and its “accomplishments.”

Edward Gibbon, author of the seminal *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published between 1776 and 1788, held a hostility towards imperialism that represented the stance of many nineteenth-century Roman historians that followed in his wake. After visiting ancient ruins at Rome in 1764, Gibbon wrote to his father that he was convinced “there never never existed such a nation and [he hoped] for the happiness of mankind that there never will again.”<sup>8</sup> In *Decline and Fall* he

5. Haverfield 9

6. Seeley 188

7. Hingley 20

8. Gibbon in J.E. Norton’s *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, cited from preface to 2000 edition of Penguin Classics’ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

declares: “There is nothing perhaps more averse to nature and reason than to hold in obedience remote countries and foreign nations.”<sup>9</sup> He therefore seemingly rejected fundamental aspects of imperialism.

Gibbon’s aversion to empire resonated down the decades, but as Britain developed as a world power and began to control “remote countries and foreign nations,” the concept of empire grew more relevant, and some historians warily started to see parallels between Roman and British policy. John Sheppard drew a memorable analogy in his 1861 history *The Fall of Rome and the Rise of the New Nationalities*. In one chapter, he gives the “reins to imagination” to illustrate how Britain would be if its condition directly resembled that of Imperial Rome:

Parliaments, meetings, and all the ordinary expressions of the national will, are no longer in existence. A free press has shared their fate [...] a number of the richest old gentlemen in London meet daily at Westminster to receive orders from Buckingham Palace. [...] The last heir of the house of Brunswick is lying dead [...] [Lord Clyde] in a few months will be marching upon London at the head of the Indian army. [...] Hyde Park has been converted into a gigantic arena, where criminals from Newgate “set to” with the animals from the Zoological Gardens.<sup>10</sup>

This account portrays the Roman Empire as despotic, chaotic, and immoral. And by contrasting Rome’s situation with Britain’s, it effectively “reflects the perfection of Victorian England and the British Empire.”<sup>11</sup> But is Sheppard simply making a smug reflection on current affairs? The fact that he draws this parallel alone indicates some level of concern about where Britain is headed. Indeed, at the end of the analogy, he offers a warning against despotism and refers to his fanciful story as “the language of prophecy.”<sup>12</sup> British policy overseas had begun to resemble Roman Imperialism, and Sheppard’s account shows us that some historians took an un-

*Abridged Edition.*

9. Gibbon 142

10. Sheppard 104-5

11. Hingley 20

12. Sheppard 106

easy notice of it. An author in Gibbon's day would not likely have envisioned a British lord at the head of an Indian army.

As England's imperial role grew more pronounced and as the reigns of "despots" such as France's Napoleon III waned, hostility towards imperialism started to decline. By the 1870s, Britain began to adopt the overt trappings of empire. In 1876, Queen Victoria took the title "Empress of India" after a heated debate about the Royal Titles Bill, which bestowed the honor<sup>13</sup>. Hingley argues that through discussions such as this an imperial discourse developed that "drew upon the image of the Roman Empire in a positive fashion."<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, between the 1850s and 1880s, views on the Roman Empire made an about-face. It became acceptable and even popular in Britain to be an imperialist—a label that now described someone who wanted to "tighten the bonds" which held the empire together<sup>15</sup>. Under the influence of classical historians such as the German scholar Theodor Mommsen, the very concepts with which historians associated the Roman Empire changed. Accounts of Roman history now focused on its positive effects, such as progress and the spreading of "civilization."

Historians were fully aware of the reversal in opinion. J.R. Seeley, in his important book *The Expansion of England* (published in 1883, only seven years after the Royal Titles Bill), charted and even explained the change in attitude:

There was a time no doubt when even the Roman Empire, because it was despotic and in some periods unhappy and half-barbarous, was thought uninteresting. A generation ago it was the reigning opinion that there is nothing good in politics but liberty [...]. The Roman Republic was held in honour for its freedom [...]. We have [now] learnt that there are many good things in politics beside liberty; for instance there is nationality, there is civilization<sup>16</sup>.

According to Seeley, previous Roman historians had dwelt on the weaknesses

and vices of the Roman Empire, and did not notice other good things, such as nationality. In seeing Rome's empire as a positive achievement that "stands out in the very centre of human history,"<sup>17</sup> Seeley's view represented the new, reigning attitude towards Rome that effectively replaced Gibbon's by the end of the Victorian period.

Historians also revised Britain's connection to Rome. Mid-Victorians had most often associated their race and civilization with the Anglo-Saxons, who invaded England after the Romans had left the island. However, by Edwardian times, this theory had given way to theories of Romanization, advocated by influential archaeologists such as Francis Haverfield<sup>18</sup>. The Romanization hypothesis argued that Rome had passed its civilization to England and that some descendants of civilized Roman Britons survived after the Empire fell<sup>19</sup>. The English, therefore, were a people of "mixed race," and this characteristic was now seen as a "source not of weakness but of strength."<sup>20</sup> Romanization distanced the English from other Teutonic peoples such as the Germans, who in the early twentieth century had become a threat to national security, and forged a direct link to the classical Romans as ancestors of the English.

As the histories from Gibbon to Seeley show, by the late Victorian period, Britain had become overtly imperial, and in the process, its attitude towards the Roman Empire had changed. It began to see itself as the heir to Caesar's Empire and to draw upon Rome's imperial image with few scruples. Haverfield, in his Romanization of Roman Britain, explains that the old theory of the Roman Empire "has been overthrown, and the believer in human nature can now feel confident that, whatever their limitations, the men of the Empire wrought for the betterment and the happiness of the world."<sup>21</sup> So too, by

extension, would the men of the British Empire.

### Edwardian Attitudes Towards Rome: The Torch Bearer and the Tutor

The imperial discourse that evolved during Queen Victoria's reign arguably reached the height of its development and influence during the early twentieth century. Hingley identifies that a "range of relevant publications" appeared during the period from 1905 to 1914<sup>22</sup>. As the years led up to the Great War, a number of academics and administrators such as Lord Cromer, Charles Lucas, and Stanley Baldwin drew heavily from perceived parallels between the Roman and British Empires and sought to apply them to British policy overseas. Hingley implies in *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen* that these Edwardian scholars and politicians "stretched and distorted the archaeological and historical evidence" to create an analogy between the Roman and British empires, which were, in actuality, "very different in organization and development."<sup>23</sup> But the texts that he points to, such as Lord Cromer's 1910 *Ancient and Modern Imperialism*, chart important differences in addition to similarities between British and Roman imperialism. Though some evidence may undoubtedly appear distorted with respect to modern scholarship, for the most part, these texts do not envision Rome as a simple analogy to Britain. Rather, they consider Britain as Rome's heir to the concept of imperialism. The Roman Empire, in their view, was an experiment not to repeat but to learn from. Two pieces of evidence indicate their attitude: the use of images such as the "torch of civilization" passed from Rome to Britain, and explicit statements stressing the importance of learning from Rome by both emulating its fortes and avoiding its follies and foibles.

Of course, late Victorian and Edwardian authors enthusiastically noted any similarities that they could find between

13. Hingley 22

14. Ibid 22

15. Ibid 22

16. Seeley 188-9

17. Seeley, cited from Hingley 24

18. Hingley 4

19. Ibid 95

20. Ibid 94

21. Haverfield 10

22. Hingley 25

23. Ibid 156

the Roman and British empires. Lord Cromer, for example, thought that the notion of imperialism, “as we understand, and as the Romans, with many notable differences, understood the term” was in essence the same<sup>24</sup>.

In *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* he proceeds to argue that Britain’s situation regarding its imperial role resembled Rome’s. Each step towards establishing empire was “taken with a reluctance which was by no means feigned.”<sup>25</sup> Further, he notes that Rome “was impelled onwards by the imperious and irresistible necessity of acquiring defensible frontiers; that the public opinion of the world scoffed 2,000 years ago, as it does now, at the alleged necessity; and that each onward move was attributed to an insatiable lust for extended dominion.”<sup>26</sup> The perceived similarities in world public opinion and basic reasons for acquiring empire are remarkable. Cromer also draws parallels between British and Roman methods of implementing empire, arguing that both of their imperialists displayed “undaunted audacity” in their “proceedings”<sup>27</sup> and that both empires used “auxiliaries drawn from the countries which they conquered.”<sup>28</sup> And, from his experience as the first Viceroy of Egypt, he noted that the system employed by the British in Egypt and India bears “a striking similarity to that adopted by the Romans.”<sup>29</sup> As is evident, at least some British administrators saw significant parallels between Roman and British rule.

However, Cromer, along with other authors, also notes major differences between Augustus’s empire and Victoria’s. Christianity, for example, “had intervened between the two periods,” and had bestowed moral principles on Britain that were essentially “unknown to the ancient world.”<sup>30</sup> Charles Lucas, meanwhile, in his 1912 book *Greater Rome and Greater*

*Britain*, raises more differences than similarities. According to him, concepts “of space, youth, and science” play an important role in British imperialism, but there exists “no analogy to be found in the Roman Empire.”<sup>31</sup> The effects of religion, race, and medicine also differ<sup>32</sup>. Lucas even suggests that some fundamental motives behind British and Roman imperialism differ, such as commercialism: “British trade and colonization have known no limits. The policy has not been that of the Roman Wall.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the few similarities he does record depict Britain’s Empire as morally and materially superior to Rome’s—perhaps a more fitting title for his book is *Greater Rome and Even Greater Britain*.

Despite pointing out vast differences between Roman and British imperialism, Lucas and related historians and politicians do not reject the importance of the Roman example. In fact, Lucas directly considers its relevance in *Greater Rome*: “How did the Romans hold their Empire for so long a time? How has the British Empire been held together up to date? And by what means, judging from past experience, and from the signs of the times, are we likely to continue holding it?” Even with all of its differences, the history of Rome still provided important questions for British imperialists. Hingley contends that “the parallel between British India and Roman Britain was not always felt to be exact but this did not detract from its value.”<sup>34</sup> This concept applied to the “Roman example” in general. As J.C. Stobart observes in his 1912 *The Grandeur that was Rome*, the contemporary Englishman “cannot help drawing analogies from Roman history and seeking in it ‘morals’ for his own guidance.”<sup>35</sup>

Prominent classical scholars and imperial administrators explicitly echo Stobart’s notion. John Collingwood Bruce, in his book *The Roman Wall*, impelled

Englishmen to “[e]mulate the virtues that adorned [Rome’s] prosperity, and [. . .] shun the vices that were punished by her downfall”<sup>36</sup>. Former British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin endorsed this view in a 1926 address, saying that the British Empire shall fare more “worthily so long as we base our lives on the stern virtues of the Roman character and take to ourselves the warnings that Rome left for our guidance.”<sup>37</sup> Rome, as they saw it, was a historical lesson—Cromer called history “philosophy teaching by example”<sup>38</sup>—and Britain should learn from its strengths and flaws. This was the essence of the Edwardian attitude towards the Roman Empire.

In this context, Britain was not analogous to Rome, but rather its student and successor. To evoke this notion, politicians such as Cromer and Baldwin repeatedly and explicitly used the picture of Britain as the latest bearer of a “torch of imperialism.” In his 1926 address to the Classical Association, Baldwin says “Rome ran her mighty race bearing her torch on high [. . .] after many centuries it was passed to us.”<sup>39</sup> Bruce, meanwhile, uses the image of a scepter to similar effect: “The scepter which Rome relinquished, we have taken up. Great is our Honour—great our Responsibility.”<sup>40</sup> In their eyes, Britain had clearly taken up the mantle of ancient Rome.

As these statements from Cromer, Baldwin, Bruce, and others suggest, British historians and politicians in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods had a highly specific notion of the Roman Empire and its relevance to their condition. These ideas were developed in a vibrant and influential “imperial discourse”. Under Darwinian evolutionary theory and Victorian notions of progress, Hingley notes, “Britain could be argued to represent the heir to Rome” but, importantly, an heir that has “improved upon [its] inheri-

24. Cromer 9

25. Ibid 19

26. Cromer 20

27. Ibid 34

28. Ibid 35

29. Ibid 35

30. Ibid 45

31. Lucas 21

32. Ibid 73

33. Ibid 62

34. Hingley 68

35. Stobart 3, cited from Hingley 34

36. Bruce 449-450, cited from Hingley 21

37. Page 9 of Baldwin’s address *The Classics and the Plain Man*, cited from Hingley 102

38. Cromer 14

39. Hingley 102

40. Bruce 449-450, cited from Hingley 21

tance.”<sup>41</sup> Britain was Rome’s successor, and it could stand to benefit from the vices and virtues exhibited by the Roman example. Roman history and British attitudes on it had, with this in mind, likely influenced British imperial policy.

### Significance: How the Imperial Discourse Affected History and Policy

The Edwardian fascination with the Roman Empire affected not only British imperial policy but also English scholarship on Roman history and archaeology. Just as imperial administrators culled lessons from Roman history—particularly about frontier policy, assimilation, and the decline and fall of empire—academics, perhaps inadvertently, projected Victorian and Edwardian concepts and attitudes onto ancient Rome. An association between several important classical Roman scholars and imperial administrators, such as Haverfield, Arnold, Cromer, and Baldwin, may have assisted in this osmosis of ideas.

Lord Cromer’s *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* illustrates how considerations of Roman history influenced frontier policy and the assimilation of cultures under the rule of the Empire. Hingley argues that studies such as Cromer’s comparison of Roman and British military frontiers directly informed policy concerning boundaries such as the northern “Customs Hedge” or “Salt Hedge” frontier of British India<sup>42</sup>. Cromer also uses Rome to reflect on faltering British attempts to assimilate foreign cultures. He contends that, in the light of history, the ability of Rome to effectively incorporate subjugated peoples is easily explained.<sup>43</sup> In a perhaps simplistic explanation of the situation, he argues that the Romans had only encountered “tribes” that easily accepted Roman culture in their Western European conquests. The British, meanwhile, faced peoples with “crystallized” customs, such as “Hindoos” and “Mohammedans”, and their traditions

41. Hingley 86  
42. Hingley 41  
43. Cromer 91

offered a “formidable barrier” to assimilation<sup>44</sup>. He provides a historical example in support of his theory: the Romans had failed to incorporate Jews into their empire<sup>45</sup>.

Perhaps the most important lesson that Rome held for British policymakers was how to avoid imperial decline. Germany’s mounting clout on the continent by the turn of the century had come to challenge the unrivalled dominance that Britain had enjoyed during the early Victorian era, and many officials during the Edwardian period and even into the 1920s turned to Roman history in an attempt to avoid the decay and collapse of their own empire. Former British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour devoted a third of his 1908 address on ‘Decadence’ to the decline of Rome<sup>46</sup>. Gibbon’s vivid account also proved influential in this context. In 1905, for example, Elliot Mills anonymously released a pamphlet called *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, a fictional future account of Britain’s collapse around 1995. “Had the English people [ . . . ] turned to Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,” he warns, “they might have found in it a not inaccurate description of themselves.”<sup>47</sup> The implication is clear: Roman history could actually help save the British Empire from disintegration. Mills’s pamphlet sold successfully and enjoyed wide influence<sup>48</sup>.

Just as accounts of Roman history influenced British public and official outlook on Empire, generally positive attitudes towards imperialism during the ‘late Victorian and Edwardian years influenced the study of Rome and especially of Roman Britain, infusing it with contemporary notions of progress<sup>49</sup>. One of the main purposes of Hingley’s book is to illustrate how such “progressive views continued to inspire images of Roman Britain [until]

44. Ibid 90  
45. Ibid 95  
46. Hingley 33  
47. Mills iii-iv, cited from Hingley 31  
48. Hingley 32  
49. Ibid 152

the 1990s,”<sup>50</sup> and his evaluation of twentieth century British literature on Rome demonstrates the continuing influence of scholars such as Haverfield. Archaeology stands equally affected. Hingley shows that until the 1960s, almost all excavation of Roman remains in Britain occurred in major towns and villas—sites originally of interest because they offered more evidence of Romanization—as opposed to villages<sup>51</sup>. According to him, Victorian concepts of progress and social evolution, along with the Romanization hypothesis and other scholarship they have inspired, are no longer valid<sup>52</sup>. Freeman, in his paper on the origin of Romanization, echoes this sentiment when he asks, “given its historical context in 19th-C. scholarship, is the concept of Romanization an appropriate one to use today?”<sup>53</sup> The entire field, according to these authors, may require revision.

### Conclusion: Education, Politics, and the “British Example”

It may already be evident that one reason behind the circular influence of British imperial policy and British scholarship on Roman history is the connection between academics and administrators in late Victorian and Edwardian England. Officials such as Cromer admitted that even an “imperfect acquaintance with classical literature” conferred “immense benefits”<sup>54</sup>. Meanwhile, as Hingley argues, intellectuals such as Haverfield “drew on the value of Roman imperial studies with a direct mention of the importance of foreign service.”<sup>55</sup>

Haverfield and several other eminent classical scholars worked at key academic institutions such as Oxford University, which produced “a majority” of the Empire’s civil servants and administrators<sup>56</sup>. From such intellectual bastions their views

50. Ibid 164  
51. Ibid 150  
52. Ibid 153  
53. Freeman 47  
54. Cromer 2  
55. Hingley 54  
56. Ibid 26

influenced current and future Imperial officials. But professors learned from politicians, too. Books and speeches concerning ancient Rome by Imperial administrators such as Lord Cromer and Lord Curzon<sup>57</sup> abound. A more dramatic indication of policymakers' influence on academia is the appointment of Lord Cromer in 1910 and Stanley Baldwin in 1926 to the Presidency of the Classical Association. From

57. For example, his speech *Frontiers*, given at Oxford University in 1907.

such positions, figures with power in the British Empire were able to affect views on the classical Roman Empire.

This relationship between academics and public policy is not unique to classical Roman history or, for that matter, the Edwardian period. Even today, professional and popular books by scholars such as Niall Ferguson (who is ironically from Oxford) spread academic views of concepts such as Empire to the public and to policymakers. We have seen how, facilitated by the connection between scholars

and administrators, British attitudes towards the Roman Empire during the Imperial Era—the notions of Britain as the heir to Rome's Empire and of Rome as a provider of lessons to Britain—affected imperial policy as well as Roman history and archaeology. Similarly, the history of Empire, both Roman and British, may influence the actions of the United States—perhaps the current bearer of the “imperial torch”—in the years to come.

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Manu Lakkur is a senior/co-term majoring in Electrical Engineering. Curious about the classical world, he used his grant from the Stanford University President Scholar program to visit Roman ruins in Italy last year. This paper was written while studying abroad at Oxford—many of the sources were rare books maintained by the Bodelian Library at Rhodes House. When he is not thinking about Ancient Rome, Manu enjoys skiing, tennis, and good conversations. He served as co-Editor-in-Chief of *Stanford Scientific* from 2005 to 2006.