When James Stephen, chief civil servant at the British Government’s Colonial Office, returned to his desk after the Christmas break in late December 1837 among the first despatches confronting him contained news of a rebellion of French and English-speaking settlers in the colonies of Lower and Upper Canada. Through the first four months of the New Year, whilst he continued to be preoccupied with potential revolution in the Canadas, he also intervened in a debate between Lieutenant Governor and Governor over treaties with the Xhosa people on the frontier of the Cape Colony, mediated a challenge to the authority of the Justice of the Peace in Port Natal and responded to the first reports of the Dutch-speaking Voortrekkers’ mass emigration across the Cape Colony’s border – all in southern Africa. At the same time he resisted a massive land grab and extension of sovereignty in New South Wales, approved of new measures for surveying the coastline in South Australia and agreed reluctantly to the establishment of a mounted police force to punish Aboriginal people attempting to drive back invading Britons in the Australian colonies. He worried about the seizure of eleven British subjects by a chief neighbouring Sierra Leone and advised caution about Belgium’s establishment of a colony adjoining the Gold Coast in West Africa. He forwarded appeals for more troops from Gibraltar in the Mediterranean and from Heligoland in the North Sea, and consulted with the Foreign Office over how best to greet the Egyptian Pasha’s envoy, on his way to London to study English artillery innovations. All the while, he was conscious that the date for the final emancipation of Britain’s slaves in the Caribbean colonies, the Cape Colony and Mauritius was looming. He had yet to advise who exactly was to be freed, and how.

It would have been remarkable if James Stephen and his colleagues in imperial governance were able to concentrate on any one of Britain’s colonies in isolation for any substantial period without interruption. And yet colonial and imperial history is written for the most part as if they did. Until relatively recently, historians of each of Britain’s former colonies have written within a field of vision delimited by national borders. Despite the rise of transnational and networked approaches, there has, as yet, been no account of how the British empire was governed at any one time, in all its complexity and diversity, and considering all of its colonies. One might expect that historians of the British Empire as a whole would have had a better appreciation than historians of particular colonies, of the multiple and dispersed issues and places that imperial officials engaged with on a daily basis. But for the most part, they seem to have assumed that the empire was governed, if not one place, then one issue at a time. Most histories of the empire proceed chronologically through its origins, growth, consolidation and decline, dwelling upon themes such as slavery and abolition, the scramble for Africa, and colonial nationalism and independence without considering what it was to govern multiple places and deal with multiple issues simultaneously. The simultaneity of major crises such as the First Afghan War and the First Opium War (1838-9), the Indian Uprising and the Second Opium War (1856-7), and the Second Afghan War and the Anglo-Zulu War (1879-80), is rarely remarked, even though the processes, beliefs and even structures of imperial governance were shaped by their concurrence.

Alan Lester is writing the first account of the British Empire that examines its governance everywhere and all at once, for selected moments. You are invited in this masterclass to consider the new perspectives that might develop in your own research if concurrence and simultaneity are emphasized over periodization, chronology and spatial compartmentalization.