



PERSPECTIVES ON THE END OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

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It is usual in the numerous publications on imperial history that have appeared in the recent past to begin by pointing out that this has been the subject of a renewed interest over the past twenty years. It may equally be said that the interest in this particular area of history has not been limited to the university world. Indeed, unlike a great many other fields of history, the British Empire has roused widespread debate in the media and has been the subject of much comment on the part of leading politicians in Britain and elsewhere. Ignorance of, and a general disinterest in, our history may be a regrettable fact of life in early twenty-first century Britain. Questions of Empire, however, still seem to be able to raise strong passions and provoke debate across society. Clearly our imperial history still has much life left in it: we are still far from putting this particular part of our history to bed, even fifty years after the Empire seemingly disappeared from the map. That the subject should continue to provoke such a debate is surely a sign of a healthy interest in our past; its often passionate, sometimes vitriolic, nature and the lack of any consensus emerging over it, are to be welcomed, particularly coming after a long period when, for many in Britain at least, there was a comfortable but deceptive sense that this history had been put behind us once and for all. We can, however, regret that there is still all too often a refusal to face up to some of the darker sides of this story and at times a blatant misuse of this history for present-day political needs.

The British Empire is, therefore, certainly a subject of great interest, both to historians and to the wider public. The controversies it continues to raise are still very much alive – although there are frequent accusations that the

British people, and those of the rest of Western Europe, prefer to forget it and that there is a collective amnesia when it comes to Empire. This may be true in some cases, including many of today's politicians, for some professional historians, and certainly for large parts of the public. At the same time what other area of British history has been the subject of any greater interest over recent years? This is, therefore, far from being a 'dry' history. Rather it is one of great concern to today's world, in part because we are still living with the legacy of Empire, what it has done to Britain and to other parts of the world. The debates this subject raises also play an important part in the contemporary political debate.

The debate over this history is, of course, made more difficult by the great complexity of the British Empire and its multidimensional character that have often been remarked upon. Despite the inclination of some people, particularly in the media, to reduce it to an overly simplistic discussion of the record of the Empire, asking just how good or bad it was by drawing up some sort of balance sheet, the picture is necessarily more complicated than these approaches would suggest. There are numerous, and widely different, interpretations that have been put forward to explain the Empire's rise and its fall, or what colonialism was and what it meant for the people it affected, or how and why the process of decolonisation took place. In the space available here this paper will attempt to introduce just some of these issues. No doubt these deserve far more time and space than can be given to them here. Nor is this anything like a complete list. It will, therefore, limit itself to some general remarks and not, as perhaps the title suggests, attempt an overall view of the whole historiography of this vast subject. There are a great many questions and discussions that have been raised. The precise answers to them, if there are any, are more difficult to find. This, however, should not discourage us from pursuing the debates, however unlikely it seems that we will reach any clear-cut conclusions or find any broad consensus on them in the near future.

This paper will take some examples from across the various regions of the Empire and from various periods of its history, at least that part which is part of the programme. This, however, needs to be done very carefully and with, at the outset, the explicit proviso that a case study of one particular element of the British Empire at one particular moment in its history cannot be regarded as providing us with an explanation of the Empire as a whole.

Each case, and each period in time, is, in some ways at least, particular. This is not to say that they can be separated, or that each history can be treated in isolation. Rather the various histories of Empire (and it is important to emphasise the plural form here) are interconnected with one another in a variety of ways. From one time and one place to another the stories are both distinct and yet they are part of a broader picture. Nor are the dimensions of time and place the only variable factors. We need also to consider the different actors in these stories and the different perspectives each of them had. Then there are the various dimensions on which the Empire operated in political, military, constitutional, economic, cultural, commercial, and in many other ways. Given all of these factors the picture necessarily becomes multidimensional and multifaceted and we should be wary of any overly simple explanations.

We need, therefore, at the outset to identify the problems of definition that are inherent in this subject and to recognise the complexity of what the British Empire was. Even at the apparently simplest level there are questions that need to be raised. Perhaps most basically what do we mean by the 'Empire' or 'colonialism' or 'imperialism'?¹ What was its extent? How far did it stretch and how deeply did it go? Furthermore, whose Empire should we focus our attention on? Exactly whose Empire are we talking about?

It is generally recognised today that the British Empire needs to be seen as something more than simply those parts of the world map painted red. Of course this formal Empire did exist, but even this should not be seen as a homogenous bloc. To list all its component parts would take too long. At its

¹ As Bernard Porter has put it: « Une grande partie de cette controverse repose en réalité sur la sémantique. Il n'y a (assurément en anglais) aucune définition « exacte » des termes « impérialiste », « Empire », « colonialisme », etc. On a donc la liberté d'utiliser les mots à sa guise. Pour ma part, je préfère une signification qui conserve le sens de « domination » de la racine latine (« imperium ») ; cette domination n'a pas besoin d'être « officielle » ou absolue (quel genre de pouvoir l'est ?), mais cette signification n'inclut pas les influences dont on pourrait dire que le pays ou le parti qui les « reçoit » y souscrit volontairement. Par conséquent, je ne reconnais en aucune façon qui nous soit utile ici la prolifération de McDonald's ou de Starbucks (ou bien les sandwiches Au Bon Pain), comme de « l'impérialisme ». Le problème, c'est que si on élargit trop le sens d'une expression, sa valeur comme outil analytique s'en retrouve affaiblie » [PORTER, 2008 : 16].

extremes it went from India, an Empire in itself and a hotchpotch of different forms of British control, to various sparsely populated islands such as Pitcairn or the Falklands; it included the white settler colonies of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada (each with their own specific identities and histories) and the more inhospitable and unwelcoming – at least from the British perspective – colonies of tropical Africa. The legal and constitutional status of these components of Empire included Dominions, Crown Colonies, Protectorates, an Anglo-French ‘condominium’ in the New Hebrides and another Anglo-Egyptian ‘condominium’ in the Sudan, League of Nations Mandates, Treaty Ports and coaling stations, concessions where Britain enjoyed extra-territorial rights and various other forms of more or less formal control. We should also include Ireland, whose ambiguous position in the Empire has been the source of much recent historical debate, as both a colony and victim of British imperialism and yet also in many ways a player elsewhere in that very same imperialism. As Ronald Hyam has written, the ‘Empire was a global mosaic of almost ungraspable complexity and staggering contrasts.’ [HYAM, *Declining Empire* : 3]

Even in the apparently simple terms of geography the limits of Empire are not always easily defined. The British Empire certainly went beyond simply those parts of the world where Britain exercised formal control and where British sovereignty was effective. As John Darwin has put it, there existed beyond the strict confines of the formal and political or constitutional Empire a ‘vast abstract realm of assets and interests’ [DARWIN : 10] of shipping, overseas investments, railways and the various companies that supported and held together what he has identified as a complex and inter-related ‘British world system’. This informal Empire could be taken to include large parts of South America, the Middle East and even China. Some observers saw Argentina as a sixth Dominion² and even Palestine as a seventh.

Equally this Empire took on various aspects. As Ronald Hyam has written, it could be

² In 1929 the British Ambassador said that ‘Argentina must be regarded as an essential part of the British Empire’ [DARWIN : 373]. There were at this time 40,000 British passport-holders in the country.

an ecological Empire, of wheat and daisies, cocoa, bananas, maize, and cotton transplanted across continents. Sheep were introduced into New Zealand, and, less happily, rabbits into Australia. There was an Empire of sport: everywhere there was football and cricket, horse-racing and golf. The Empire was a web of submarine cables, supplemented by wireless, telegraphs, and shipping. The Empire might become 'an Empire of the air'... The Empire was a set of prostitution-networks. The Empire was a great Muslim power. The Empire was a great Christian domain, embracing the world-wide missionary movement, and the Anglican Communion... Perhaps above all else, the Empire was a field of migration, abounding in diasporas. There were Scots in the Falkland Islands, Welsh in Patagonia, Irish in Australia, Arabs around the Indian Ocean, Chinese in British Columbia. The Empire spread Indian communities into fifty-three countries.' [HYAM, *Declining Empire* : 7-8]

Such 'webs of Empire' have been increasingly highlighted in recent histories of the British Empire.

Ronald Hyam goes further still and asks 'what do we mean when we speak of 'the British Empire'?' [HYAM, *Understanding the British Empire* : 18] He is surely right to emphasise that this 'Empire' was never monolithic, that it had no uniform structure and that its nature changed over time. More provocatively and more controversially he asks questions about what precisely imperialism and imperial rule meant. 'The most fundamental question to ask', he writes

is exactly what the British Empire was; whether, even, there was in any real sense an Empire at all, about which generalisations can be made. It is one thing to assert that the British 'ruled' much of India and Africa, quite another to argue that they controlled what happened there. For, in certain crucial respects, 'Empire' was a myth, an illusion based upon a gigantic confidence trick perpetuated by the 'rulers'. [*Ibid.*]

One article written by Ged Martin in 1972 asked in its title 'Was there a British Empire?' [MARTIN].

The problem of defining 'Empire' becomes even greater when we consider the 'Commonwealth', which is open to even more ambiguous definitions, as

well as to all sorts of interpretations, reflecting diametrically opposed interpretations. The British diplomat Sir Oliver Franks in the 1954 Reith Lecture on the BBC described it in the following terms:

How easily the words come together on our lips: 'Britain and the British Commonwealth.' The idea for which they stand is comfortable and familiar: the fact to which they refer, solid and comforting. We feel differently about our relations within the Commonwealth and those we have with the rest of the world. When we deal with the other members of the Commonwealth we are dealing with our own family. They are tied to us by kinship or long association. We understand each other: we get on: we settle things within the family. There are differences: what family is without them? But they are not allowed to disturb our mutual understanding. [FRANKS]

This vision of the Commonwealth is hardly different from that given fifty years earlier at the beginning of the century as seen, for example, in Lloyd George's presentation of the Empire as a 'great association of free nations'³. It is doubtful that others in the Commonwealth, especially as its membership expanded from the 1950s onwards, would have accepted this ideal vision of a 'happy international family' of nations.

The question of the extent of the British Empire can also be seen in another way beyond the purely geographical limits when we consider the extent and the depth to which the Empire impregnated Britain and British society. This question, as we will see below, has great significance when we come to think of how the Empire came to end. Here the debate is between, on one side, those who see British society and the British people as having been 'steeped' or 'saturated' in imperialism, who argue that the Empire was an integral part in the country's politics, its values, thoughts and ideas and in how it saw itself at home and in the world. On the opposing side are those who argue that the British were broadly indifferent to their Empire, particularly in its later stages. Amongst the former are Edward Said and John MacKenzie along with other post-colonial thinkers and historians of the 'new imperial history' [MACKENZIE : 275]. The strongest rejection of this case has come from

³ See Pauline Collombier's article.

Bernard Porter⁴. Historians such as Ronald Hyam and others have argued that they themselves grew up in post-war Britain but were barely affected by the Empire. A.P. Thornton went so far as to argue that the British people 'were always indifferent to the future of the British Empire'. In reply some 'post-colonialist' historians have argued that they may not have noticed it, but it was nonetheless very much there, running throughout the whole of society. All this reflects the more fundamental debates in the study of imperial history today relating to the need for empirical evidence in support of such arguments: can the Empire be there in British society without it being immediately seen, can it have had a profound impact even if this was not immediately and personally felt? We will return to this point below.

When we look at the British Empire we may also ask the question of where, and on whom, we should focus our attention. As we have seen above the Empire included a whole series of different actors and it had an impact on a wide range of groups. So whose story we are telling? Are we talking of the British Empire only from the British perspective? In which case which Britons are we talking of? The Britons of Great Britain, the English, Scots, Welsh and Irish, or what some historians have referred to as the Britons of 'Greater Britain' in the settler colonies? Equally, these Britons, at home and abroad, came in all shapes and sizes, and from all social classes. As Ronald Hyam has put it: 'The British milled about the world in all their multifarious guises: fresh-faced district officers, hymn-singing missionaries, eccentric engineers, elegant diplomats, drunken sailors' [*Declining Empire* : 5] and in a host of other roles as well. Perhaps more importantly, are we looking at the Empire of the colonisers or of the colonised; or of all those on whom the Empire had an impact, directly or indirectly, in which case we are dealing with almost the whole world? This debate has been a particularly important one in the historiography of the British Empire over the past thirty years. The rise of the 'subaltern studies' group of historians centred on South Asia from the 1980s challenged parts of the more established approach. In particular they questioned the previous focus of imperial history on the attitudes, policies and impact of Britain. Instead they sought to focus their attention on the previously voiceless masses, particularly those in India. This may be seen as 'history from below' as opposed to 'archival history' or

⁴ See, for example, PORTER, *Absent-Minded Imperialists* and 'L'Empire dans l'histoire britannique' : 135.

'official history'; looking at the history of ordinary and poor people; not excluding or dismissing them as passive victims of Empire but seeing them as active agents in this history.

The image we have of Empire, how we interpret its rise and fall, depends very much on whose viewpoint we choose to focus on, whose Empire we are looking at. The complaint of the subaltern studies group was that too much imperial history was only looking at the British perspective, and at the official British level at that, ignoring the people on the receiving end of Empire; that there was a distortion produced as a result of the focus on high politics, on government decisions in London or New Delhi, rather than on the people at the other end of the imperial or social scale – the most extreme cases being those of the African or Indian peasants. The history of these people was undoubtedly nothing like that of the British Viceroy or ministers in London. Equally, in the history of the Dominions it was the history of the white settlers that was the almost exclusive attention of historians until recent years when the voices of the Australian aborigines, the Maoris or the first-nation Canadians came to be treated with more seriousness⁵.

Further controversies quickly come to the fore when we look at the debates on how the Empire was held together, the motives behind Britain's imperial role, and the nature of the relations between the Empire's various parts. When looking at the Empire John Darwin has emphasised the 'chaotic pluralism of British interests at home and of their agents and allies abroad'. This produced a multiplicity of factors at work in determining British policies. The Empire certainly meant many different things to different groups at home and in the colonies. For Darwin, however, this did not mean that the British Empire, or, to use his preferred term, the British 'world system', was without any coherence and he argues that while it was beyond the capacity of the government in London to impose a system on its Empire a system emerged nonetheless. British rule, therefore, was partly based on a system of formal control and partly on informal influence.

⁵ The increasing use of the Maori word 'Aotearoa' for New Zealand, or in conjunction with it, is a reflection of this. See Rognvald Leask's article, 'What Place for the People of the Land? The Decolonisation Process in Aotearoa-New Zealand'.

More controversy surrounds John Darwin's rejection of the idea that Britain, through its Empire, enjoyed a position of hegemony in the world or that it established a coherent system of centralised control over its colonies. Instead he argues that Britain 'managed' rather than commanded the various overseas components that made up its Empire. For Darwin the 'British world-system was not a structure of global hegemony, holding in thrall the non-Western world.' Such a 'hegemonic authority', he maintains, 'eluded all British leaders from Lord Palmerston to Churchill' [DARWIN : 1]. In his view the British Empire, or world system, was never a benevolent family of nations and what he terms the 'Empire of authority' remains a 'key element in British world power' [18]. Yet, in Darwin's account, this is not the key to understanding how the British Empire or world system came about or how it was maintained for so long. For Darwin the answer to this lies in the ways in which the British were able to combine their own strength with the strengths of the overseas components of this Empire-system and it is the analysis of the linkages between the imperial centre and colonial peripheries that is at the heart of his account of the British Empire. These linkages he sees as being partly persuasive, partly coercive, some official, some unofficial. What made this system operate so successfully and for so long was, in Darwin's view, the fact that large parts of the business and political elites in different parts of the world were willing to 'acknowledge the benefits that membership of the British system... and concede that its various costs were worthwhile' [13].

It inevitably follows on from this that in Darwin's view too much has been made of the 'nationalist' histories' over-emphasis of the resistance to British rule. If, as Darwin argues, the British in their overseas system 'could make little use (even if they wanted to) of coercive methods or authoritarian rule' [12] then it must follow that there was a good degree of acquiescence and participation in, if not outright support for, this British world system among the local elites. In this way Darwin presents a picture of the anti-colonial movements that is far more ambivalent than that given in many other accounts, a picture where independence movements in colonial societies were looking far more for tactical advantages rather than to a complete strategic rethinking of the relationship with the imperial centre. Autonomy, Darwin argues, was far more likely to be the ambition of these movements rather than outright sovereignty, at least up until the final collapse of this

imperial order in the late 1930s and early 1940s when the international storm that shook the whole world to its roots made the entire British world system untenable. Until that point, Darwin argues, 'in a world of predatory powers, the imperial frying-pan was not the worst place to be' [12]. This account, and others like it, has been sharply contested. Looking at all the various histories of the British Empire in its entirety and across the complete timescale of its existence, it is possible to find examples both of resistance to British imperial rule and collaboration with it. The balance between the two often varied over time and from one part of the Empire to another. Violent resistance against the first European settlers was frequent. This never entirely disappeared. Yet we cannot altogether dismiss the idea of acquiescence and even active collaboration on the part of some. During the Second World War, the example of the Indian National Army that fought alongside the Japanese against the British needs to be balanced with the record of the New Zealand Maori battalion that fought actively in its defence. No doubt a multitude of other examples could be found to further complicate the picture.

Further problems of definition also exist when we come to look at the ways in which the British Empire ended. As Mélanie Torrent has already underlined when she writes of the 'deceptive ends of Empire' we cannot be overly precise when we come to consider what we mean by the 'end of Empire'. Nor are the questions of when, why and how this happened simple ones. Various terms have been used to describe this event or process in the vast number of accounts that have addressed this issue: the British Empire 'crumbled', either through its own decay or as the result of being undermined from without; it 'collapsed' (possibly under its own weight); imperialism was 'at bay' and the Empire was 'dissolved', 'unscrambled' or, more violently, 'liquidated' (surely a rather too abrupt and complete term); more peacefully some historians have described a 'transfer of power', or 'Empire-unbuilding'; there was a 'fall' or an 'eclipse' of Empire, or, in a particularly nostalgic and rose-tinted vision, an 'imperial sunset' as the flag came down on British rule; in other accounts the picture given is one of a parting of the ways, a separation by mutual agreement in a process of mutual 'disimperialism' or 'de-Dominionisation'. Each of these terms carries with it certain connotations. Seen from the perspective of the anti-imperial 'struggle', there was an 'escape from Empire'. Of course, seen from the perspective of the decolonised the term 'liberation' is sometimes preferred to

'decolonisation'. John MacKenzie has preferred to use the term 'implosion', or rather 'a sequence of implosions, possibly ultimately detonating each other', as he says, 'in order to convey a sense of the political upheavals on the colonial periphery reverberating inwards on metropolitan society... a complicated mix of implosions, explosions, and small sputterings ranging from largish fireworks to happenings not much greater than Roman candles or hand-held sparklers.' [MACKENZIE : 273-275] Other historians have even questioned whether or not there was an end to Empire at all, suggesting that there was rather a sort of metamorphosis in which the old Empire took on new forms, maintaining the ex-colonies in a state of subjugation. In the late 1950s many in Britain were certainly critical of the French for giving up their colonies only in a superficial way, granting the form of independence while effectively holding onto their sub-Saharan Empire in more subtle ways. This, however, says more about the deeply-rooted inclination of the British to criticise the practices of their European neighbours, especially those of the French, while refusing to admit their own shortcomings in precisely the same fields. Whatever the comparative records of the different European colonialists, and the ways they carried through the process of decolonisation, there is no doubt a need to see this as having cultural and social sides as well as political or economic ones.

All these different terms given above reflect different answers to the question of how and why the Empire ended. Was it given up, and if so was it given up voluntarily? Was independence taken by force as the result of resistance and armed struggle? Was the end of Empire negotiated as part of a compromise agreement and was this achieved peacefully or not? Was it welcomed by Britain, or reluctantly accepted as inevitable, or introduced as part of a planned schedule, of a 'transfer of power' managed by the British, or was it actively resisted and fought for, and finally achieved in bloodshed?

There are some historians who have argued that the answers to the questions relating to decolonisation are to be found in the metropole, that decolonisation came about essentially as a result of a rethinking of British policy that came to see the Empire as a burden whose benefits were outweighed by the costs of holding onto it. Some liberal observers have seen this as evidence of British goodwill towards the Empire and the emerging Commonwealth. According to these interpretations Britain voluntarily handed over power in a smooth and basically benevolent fashion. Others

have pointed to international factors, especially the rise of the two superpowers, both in their ways hostile to the idea of the European colonial Empires. Others have looked instead to the periphery, seeing the nationalist and anti-colonial movements as the determinant factor making the Empire unworkable for the colonial masters who were, in this view, forced out by the pressure of the colonised peoples themselves. To take the cricketing analogy used by Ronald Hyam, the colonial masters were either 'bowled out (by nationalists and freedom-fighters), or they were run out (by imperial over-stretch and economic constraints), or they retired hurt (because of a collapse of morale and 'failure of will'), or they were booed off the field (by international criticism and especially United Nations clamour' [*Declining Empire*: xiii]. We could also argue that all three need to be taken into account.

The liberal view of a benevolent attitude towards the colonial world was widely supported in Britain at the time of decolonisation itself. Clement Attlee, who was by then an elder statesman and ex-prime Minister, argued in his 1960 lecture at Oxford that 'There have been many great Empires in the history of the world that have risen, flourished for a time, and then fallen... There is only one Empire where, without external pressure or weariness at the burden of ruling, the ruling people has voluntarily surrendered its hegemony over subject peoples and has given them their freedom... This unique example is the British Empire.' [ATTLEE: 1] The historian of the Commonwealth Nicholas Mansergh and the leading Conservative politician of his generation Harold Macmillan both presented this story in much the same way. More recently the historian Niall Ferguson has supported this idea of the British Empire's 'self-liquidating character'. He writes:

what is striking about the history of the Empire is that whenever the British were behaving despotically, there was almost always a liberal critique of that behaviour from within British society. Indeed, so powerful and consistent was this tendency to judge Britain's imperial conduct by the yardstick of liberty that it gave the British Empire something of a self-liquidating character. Once a colonized society had sufficiently adopted the other institutions the British brought with them, it became very hard for the British to prohibit that political liberty to which they attached so much significance for themselves. [FERGUSON: xxiv]

David W. McIntyre also takes a very favourable interpretation, seeing Britain's successful decolonisation of its Empire as one of its great achievements, especially when compared to the other Europeans and the trauma that France underwent over defeat in Indo-China and in Algeria. In the British case he sees a smooth passage to independence along 'the well-trod stepping stones of constitutional evolution (from) Crown colony or protectorate to representative government and responsible government, to Dominion status and on to full sovereignty and Commonwealth membership'. This, he argues, 'was the route along which virtually all parts of the Empire passed' in 'a journey through to responsible government'. [MCINTYRE : 106] As we will, see this positive and peaceful vision of the end of Empire is sharply contested by other historians.

Just as the degree to which British society was influenced or impregnated by its Empire has been the subject of much heated debate amongst historians so has the question of the impact on Britain of the process by which that Empire was lost, or given up. For John Darwin the various parts of the British Empire, ranging from what he calls the 'property Empire' to the settler societies of the white dominions and the Indian Empire, each roused quite different feelings among the British people. Just how far Britain and British society were bound up in Empire must, Darwin argues, depend on which part of Empire we are dealing with and which of the numerous constituencies that made up the British 'national' interest is being considered. Overall, Darwin argues that, by the post-1945 era, the Empire had come to be seen as far less important to the thinking of most British people and, like McIntyre, he argues that decolonisation was achieved without any political upheaval in Britain which went from being an imperial to post-imperial power without a serious shock. In similar vein, David W. McIntyre asks 'did the loss of Empire really bother the British?' [MCINTYRE : 129] while Bernard Porter has written that 'Decolonization went through on the nod' [Cited *ibid.*].

In reply to these claims John MacKenzie has argued that

the notion that the British were indifferent to their Empire and accepted decolonisation with total equanimity constitutes an interesting piece of right-wing propaganda. It has been put about by

such figures as the late Lord Beloff, who argued... that an Empire acquired in a fit of absence of mind could equally be lost by an indifferent oversight. Because the British had never developed a theory of Empire, because they were fundamentally not an imperial people, they could view the loss of their imperial baubles with equanimity. Not for them the reactions of the over-emotional French or Portuguese, who contemplated decolonisation with a series of domestic implosions, with revolutions, *coups d'état*, assassinations and new constitutions. Not for the British that Gallic spectacle of overwrought French motorists driving round and round Paris beating out on their horns 'Alger-*ie française*'. The English language does not have the beat; the British have not got the rhythm; and their cars probably do not have the horns. Clearly, this notion of the utterly indifferent British is something of a self-justificatory and consolatory travesty. [MACKENZIE : 275]

If we turn to the question of how good or bad the British Empire was and ask what, if any, its benefits were and look at the present-day debate on the Empire and the legacy it has left behind we find similar disagreements. Following on in a similar fashion to John MacKenzie, Salman Rushdie has argued that 'Four hundred years of conquest and looting, four centuries of being told that you are superior to the Fuzzy-Wuzzies and the wogs, leave their stain. This stain has seeped into every part of the culture, the language and daily life; and nothing much has been done to wash it out.' [Cited in THOMPSON : 55] Yet others, including many leading British politicians, have taken a quite different line in recent years. Margaret Thatcher, for example, is reputed to have told fellow Commonwealth Heads of Government at one summit meeting to reflect on how lucky they were to have been colonised by the British and not by anyone else. For her successor in Downing Street today, David Cameron, the British Empire should be the cause of 'neither apology nor hand-wringing'. Perhaps more surprisingly his Labour predecessors, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, made similar remarks. Brown insisted that 'the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over' and that the British 'should be proud . . . of the Empire'.

Such statements have resulted in strong reactions from other politicians and journalists. Richard Gott, writing in the *Guardian*, has argued that

A self-satisfied and largely hegemonic belief survives in Britain that the Empire was an imaginative, civilising enterprise, reluctantly undertaken, that brought the benefits of modern society to backward peoples. Indeed it is often suggested that the British Empire was something of a model experience, unlike that of the French, the Dutch, the Germans, the Spaniards, the Portuguese – or, of course, the Americans. There is a widespread opinion that the British Empire was obtained and maintained with a minimum degree of force and with maximum co-operation from a grateful local population.

This benign, biscuit-tin view of the past is not an understanding of their history that young people in the territories that once made up the Empire would now recognise. A myriad (of) revisionist historians have been at work in each individual country producing fresh evidence to suggest that the colonial experience – for those who actually "experienced" it – was just as horrific as the opponents of Empire had always maintained that it was, perhaps more so. New generations have been recovering tales of rebellion, repression and resistance that make nonsense of the accepted imperial version of what went on. Focusing on resistance has been a way of challenging not just the traditional, self-satisfied view of Empire, but also the customary depiction of the colonised as victims, lacking in agency or political will. [GOTT, *Myths of Britain's Imperial Past*]

Elsewhere Gott has condemned the semi-official *Oxford History of the British Empire* for ignoring the most negative aspects of Empire and for its 'lack of any sense of outrage at the routine horror of Empire' and as 'an attempt to construct a positive memorial to Empire'. [GOTT, *Shoot Them* : 106, 109]

The journalist Seamus Milne, also writing in the *Guardian*, has condemned the British Empire as

an avowedly racist despotism built on ethnic cleansing, enslavement, continual wars and savage repression, land theft and merciless exploitation. Far from bringing good governance, democracy or economic progress, the Empire undeveloped vast areas, executed and jailed hundreds of thousands for fighting for self-rule, ran concentration camps, carried out medical experiments on prisoners and oversaw famines that killed tens of millions of people. And far from decolonising peacefully, as Empire apologists like to claim, Britain left its colonial possessions in a trail of blood, from Kenya to Malaya, India to Palestine, Aden to Iraq. To this day, Kenyan victims

of the 1950s campaign of torture, killing and mass internment are still trying, and failing, to win British compensation during a "counter-insurgency" war that, by some estimates, left 100,000 dead. No wonder Hitler was such an enthusiastic admirer of Britain's Empire. [MILNE]

Recently published histories of the end of Empire and the so-called 'emergencies', such as David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged : Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld, 2005), Caroline Elkins's *Britain's Gulag : The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), Richard Gott's *Britain's Empire : Resistance, Repression and Revolt* (London: Verso, 2011), Martin J. Wiener's *An Empire on Trial : Race, Murder and Justice under British Rule, 1870-1935* (Cambridge: University Press, 2009) and John Newsinger's *The Blood Never Dried : A People's History of the British Empire* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2006) give strong support, backed up by convincing archival records, for this negative vision. The evidence they provide is a timely corrective to the comfortable British mythology that the British Empire was a basically humane enterprise and that it ended in a peaceful manner. As Bernard Porter has written, the fact that books such as Niall Ferguson's make no mention of the atrocities committed by the British during the Kenya 'emergency' shows a distorted lack of balance. Several of these atrocities are now, very belatedly, coming to court in London.

Such views, however well documented and convincingly argued they may be, have not led to any new consensus emerging on these questions. Against them other historians and journalists have put forward counter arguments playing down the wholly dark picture of the British Empire that these accounts give. The recent book by the Conservative MP and historian, Kwasi Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire : Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), argues that while the perspective of the oppressed is important and often overlooked in many histories of the British Empire, ultimately there was a greater degree of cooperation and mutual economic benefit than suggested in the works of Richard Gott and others like him. In parts, he argues, British imperial rule was often benign and he denies that that the crimes of the British Empire can be likened to the systematic genocides and famines of the 20th century. The historians Niall Ferguson (*Empire : How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003) and Andrew Roberts (*A History of the English Speaking Peoples Since*

1900 (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006) have defended the record of the British Empire in even stronger terms. For Roberts the Empire was 'an exemplary force for good'. Roberts, and to a lesser extent Ferguson, are, however, marginal figures in the university world in Britain although they do have a wide popularity. Ferguson's TV and radio broadcasts are widely known and appreciated. His influence, and more worryingly that of Andrew Roberts, on present-day government ministers, including the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, have been recognised. Gove's statement that we should 'celebrate' Empire at a time when the nation's school curriculum is being revised is not innocent. Roberts is also reputed to be close to both George W. Bush and Nicolas Sarkozy.

Ronald Hyam concludes that

'Balance-sheets of Empire', whether it was worthwhile, a good thing or a bad thing, have a long future in front of them. Subjective judgements are bound to prevail. Evidence can as easily be found for useful benefits and altruistic efforts as for brutality and exploitation and sheer indifference. All these ambiguities have to be taken seriously into account. Like most things in life, 'the Empire' was neither black nor white, but a mixture, a not altogether hopeless shade of grey perhaps. [HYAM, *Understanding the British Empire*: 14]

As well as these controversies on the record of the British Empire there are also some equally vitriolic debates of a more theoretical nature of what imperial history is and what its boundaries are. In particular the impact of the so-called 'new imperial histories' and the reactions to it have sparked off a series of long-running rows in the academic world.

The new imperial history has been defined as

approaches to imperial history centred on ideas of culture and, often, of discourse; ones with strong attention to gender relations and/or to racial imaginings; ones which emphasise the impact of colonialism's cultures on metropole as well as on the colonised, and tend also to urge its continuing effects after the end of formal colonial rule. They pose questions – or make assumptions – about the relationships among knowledge, identity and power, including a high degree of explicit self-consciousness about the positioning of the historians themselves.

And this extends, often, to a strong insistence on the desired, or expected, political or ethical effects of the scholars' own work. [HOWE : 2]

Tony Ballantyne has summarised this broad school as having

radically reimagined Empire, reading it not simply as a set of economic and political structures of dominance but as a cultural project... This "new imperial history" has amounted to a profound shift in the way in which colonial domination and the dynamics of Empire building have been imagined. Its cultural sensibility has greatly enlarged our sense of what colonialism was: it was not simply about extending Informal political influence, establishing economic domination, or securing sovereignty, but it was a much broader set of asymmetrical relationships grounded in the desire of the colonizer to exert mastery over the colonized society, its natural and human resources, and its cultural forms. [BALLANTYNE : 177]

As the above extracts suggest, this 'new imperial history' has shifted the boundaries of what the field has covered. Although this 'new' history has, inevitably become less and less 'new' as time goes by it has undoubtedly added further dimensions to what we mean by imperial history and has allowed the field to go beyond its previous confines, which often limited it to a broadly political, constitutional and economic approach. It has opened up new considerations of race and racism, alterity, gender and culture and other whole new fields, some of which are themselves often very broad and complex. Questions of sexuality and Empire, the ecological history of Empire, technologies, sport, school manuals, architecture, theatre, music and music halls, advertising, and cigarette packets have all been encompassed within the widened scope of the field in recent years. Significantly, the way these boundaries or limits to Imperial history are set is determinant in the answers we find to the questions raised above. This also reflects the various visions of what the Empire was and how its story unfolded. The shifting nature of these disciplinary boundaries has, therefore, thrown up not just new interrogations but has allowed us to look at them in radically different ways. Equally importantly this has produced a series of new interpretations and has fundamentally altered the way in which the history of the British Empire is seen.

The 'new imperial history' is also characterised by its inter-disciplinary nature, drawing on new methodologies from literary theories of colonial discourse and post-colonial studies, gender studies, anthropology, art history, film studies (how the Empire has been represented in film, the use of film as a support for Empire...) Its increasing focus on culture, rejecting the idea of Empire simply as a set of economic and political structures of dominance but as a broad cultural project, has had a profound impact on the very nature of the questions and the subject. This needs to be seen alongside the fundamental re-thinking of imperial history that resulted from the work of subaltern studies that has already been mentioned above and the challenges this makes to what it sees as the fundamentally imperialist approach of the more traditional schools of imperial history. Dipesh Chakrabarty, a close associate of the Subaltern Studies group, has written of 'Provincializing Europe', calling for a fundamental shift away from a European-centred approach which, he argues, underlies all western and European history and whose 'master narrative' has relegated Indian history to a position of subalternity. The models of the historian's enterprise, he argues, are always at least culturally 'European' and produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories. Similarly, Ashis Nandy has argued that history cannot be separated from its imperialist origins.

The challenges emanating from both 'subaltern studies' and the 'new imperial history' have not gone unanswered and, over the past twenty years, vast numbers of heated exchanges have been conducted between, and equally importantly within, these rival schools of the 'new' imperial history and what is, by refusing this 'new' label, seen as the 'old'. Ronald Hyam, for example, has expressed his concern for, and dismay at, the ways in which post-modernists and post-colonialists are making assumptions and interpretations of Empire without real evidence and empirical research, and he has condemned some purveyors of new imperial history as 'intellectually lazy' [HYAM, *Understanding the British Empire* : 15]. He goes on by saying that 'according to Catherine Hall' (one of the leading exponents of the 'new imperial history')

really clever theorists can interpret what was not explicitly stated; but historians who cannot see this should be excoriated for their 'fall into the darkness of empiricism'. The empirical historian's response to this kind of argument is likely to be concern at such a cavalier dismissal of

the need for evidence, followed by an attempt to suggest that fundamental assumptions – for example, that food, health, sex, and the weather play a big part in life – are usually made very explicit indeed, and are made so by constant discussion. The insistence on unconscious assumptions about the Empire has a worrying whiff of pseudo-Freudianism about it... Post-colonialists at their most extreme have even tried to argue that Victorian novels which do *not* refer to the Empire only prove how crucial it was. All this is now a minefield of difficult and contested interpretation about the impact of the Empire, the extent of imperial awareness, and whether or not there was a distinctively 'imperialist ideology' and culture. It is a minefield which will take years to clear. [16]

There have also been criticisms for some aspects of the 'new imperial history' from some historians who have themselves been influenced by much of its thinking. Frederick Cooper, for example, has identified a need for more rigorous historical practice by some in this 'new' school and he has complained of 'ahistorical history'. Bernard Porter has likewise argued that the major fault in many of these more theoretical interpretations of the history of the British Empire is their tendency to grossly oversimplify what were complex and constantly shifting relationships between the colonial power and the colonised.

'These are interesting times for practitioners of imperial and colonial history', Stephen Howe wrote a few years ago. 'Yet historians of Empire also appear to be embroiled in a slow-burning civil war' between the exponents of the old and new imperial histories (however unhelpful and imprecise such tags often are). These 'interpretive schisms' are still there. But, as he says,

we can surely try to overcome the unprofitable barriers erected between cultural and politico-economic analyses of Empires, between the ultra-empiricist and the over-theoreticist, between 'old' and 'new'. We can also attempt to dismantle or evade the still more troublesome barriers – strikingly often following the same contours as the first – which too readily and aggressively associate particular historical methods, approaches or judgements with determinate politico-ethical stances towards the historically varied forms of Empire, expansion and colonial rule. The future lies not with a 'new imperial history', but with

new histories of Empires and imperialisms: some of which are, in truth, not entirely novel but rather renewals of the old. [HOWE : 16].

In the same way Sarah Stockwell writes 'If portions of the literature seem at times to be constructed in opposition to each other this is no reason to confine one's attention exclusively to one tradition rather than another' [STOCKWELL : xii].

The contours and the limits of what imperial history is are still the subject of much debate amongst academics. Nor is the debate limited today to historians as the field has been opened up to specialists from a wide range of other disciplines. The record of the British Empire and its legacy for today's world, in Britain and across the ex-Empire, continues to be widely discussed in the press and the media. As we have seen, this debate is often very heated. It is also being picked up on and used in the contemporary political debate – often with a worrying disregard for the history itself, sometimes deliberately seeking to distort or misuse this history, and more frequently trying to ignore some of its more uncomfortable aspects. More than ever, therefore, we need to accept, as Sarah Stockwell has written, that 'there is no one story of decolonisation' [273] and to put the emphasis on the plural imperial histories.

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