**The right way to run an Empire**

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**Max Hastings reviews *Empire* by Niall Ferguson**

**By Max Hastings**

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Most modern British schoolchildren are taught that imperialism was an unalloyed evil, of which slavery was the most conspicuous manifestation. Niall Ferguson is not blind to the shortcomings of the British Empire, but he argues that it brought trade and uncorrupt institutions to vast tracts of the globe.

In 1955 British per capita GDP was just seven times greater than that of Zambia. Today it is roughly 28 times. Most Africans are less well-off than under British rule, even if they have a vote and are no longer excluded from white clubs.

In 1946 there were 74 independent countries in the world. In 1995 there were 192. Such fragmentation has created a host of nation states too small to be economically effective. Almost the only advantage many former imperial possessions enjoy is a grasp of the English language. "No organisation in history has done more to promote the free movement of goods, capital and labour than the British Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries…to impose Western norms of law, order and governance around the world," says the author.

The British did not invent empire, indeed they were late venturers where the Spanish and Dutch had gone before. They began as predators and pirates, and found themselves, almost to their own surprise, masters of a substantial part of the known earth by the early 19th century: "They had robbed the Spaniards, copied the Dutch, beaten the French and plundered the Indians. Now they ruled supreme."

Ferguson's work is a handsomely illustrated by-product of a forthcoming Channel 4 series. It should not, however, be dismissed as a mere telly spin-off. This is an elegant and thoughtful survey of a great historic achievement. An achievement that has, characteristically, been snubbed by the iniquitous National Lottery, which has recently given money to an organisation for helping asylum-seekers, while refusing aid to John Letts's new Museum of the British Empire in Bristol.

Ferguson's book does not stint in recording imperial lapses and causes for shame, but it finally offers rich sources of pride. The British people did not merely exploit overseas investment, but themselves migrated in large numbers to build new lives on the other side of the world. In the 17th and 18th centuries, some 700,000 people left the mother country. At its peak in the 1640s, emigration was above two per 1,000. By the late 19th century, the colonies had become the indispensable ports of last resort for scapegrace younger sons and fallen idols unmasked by Sherlock Holmes.

In discussing the breakaway of the transatlantic colonies, Ferguson dismisses the notion that the Americans suffered substantial fiscal burdens to justify their alienation. Indeed, they were notable beneficiaries of free trade with Britain. The issue was the social and political treatment of the colonists by an insensitive government at home. "We won't be their Negroes," snarled John Adams. Yet at least a fifth of Americans remained loyal to the crown through the War of Independence. It is interesting that well over a century later, the megalomaniac Cecil Rhodes dreamed of restoring the United States to British dominion.

Ferguson reserves his harshest criticism for some aspects of British rule in India. It is difficult for any reasonable person today not to acknowledge the Great Mutiny of 1857 as a legitimate uprising by Indians against foreign despotism, enlightened or otherwise. Ferguson likens the behaviour of some of the British suppressing the Mutiny to that of Nazi SS men. He cites the example of a young Indian boy supporting a tottering old man, pleading for mercy from a British officer at the gates of Lucknow. The soldier simply cocked his revolver against the boy's head and pressed the trigger. Once, twice, three times, it misfired. At the fourth attempt, the officer killed the Indian. The only mitigation, says the author, is that British soldiers who saw the deed loudly reproached the killer.

The British tolerated famines which killed millions in India almost as indulgently as those which devastated Ireland. Their biggest mistake in the 20th century was to focus the attention of the Raj upon the native rulers, a doomed caste, and to ignore the rising educated Indian middle class. Upmarket Indians were as indifferent to the welfare of their own masses as the British, but they would not tolerate chronic slights to themselves: "Indian nationalism was fuelled not by the impoverishment of the many, but by the rejection of the privileged few," says Ferguson.

In his account of the imperial experience during the First World War, he highlights a point also made by Hew Strachan in his recent history of the conflict. John Buchan wrote a splendid romance, Greenmantle, about a German attempt to raise the Muslim world against the British. Yet this was not a fantasy, but a serious objective of the Kaiser's minions. It was frustrated partly because Englishmen like T. E. Lawrence proved incomparably more skilful in winning Arab hearts than were the Germans.

Britain lost its empire amid the exhaustion of will and resources that followed two world wars. The United States was implacably hostile, and only belatedly moderated its view when it saw that communism presented a vastly graver peril to civilisation. In the 19th century, British imperial defence costs had been amazingly low, and were easily financed by income from the nation's huge overseas investments. These were liquidated, with remarkable selflessness, to deliver the world from the Kaiser and later Hitler, while America made a healthy profit from its participation in both world wars.

After 1945, the Empire ceased to be a source of wealth to Britain, and became a cash drain. More than that, a new generation of Englishmen of whom the former Burma policeman George Orwell was not the least, simply did not believe any longer in their divine right to rule brown and black peoples.

It is ironic that just when schoolteachers' fervour against British imperialism is at its most shrill, not a few Western policy-makers are thinking furiously about empire's virtues. Ferguson compares Osama bin Laden to the Mahdi. When the dervishes threatened Egypt in 1898, Kitchener marched an army up the Nile, liberally supplied with maxim guns. He administered no end of a lesson at Omdurman, although Winston Churchill was only one of those who recoiled from the ruthlessness of the victors' conduct. Thereafter, the British governed the Sudan in exemplary fashion for half a century, through a tiny civil service second only in quality to that which ruled India.

Ferguson suggests that the United States is today attempting to create a pax Americana with many of the objectives of its British predecessor, but lacks the confidence or coherence to adopt long-term policies. In Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Americans have intervened in the interests of local and international stability, but refuse to acknowledge the requirement to stick with a society once they have involved themselves in its destinies.

Perhaps if the United States learned to enjoy its power more, it might exercise it more effectively and sensitively. Winning a war in, for instance, Iraq, is the easy part of modern imperialism. Americans must also learn to master the harder part - making the conquered society work afterwards. That is, if they want to do half as well as the British did in preserving global peace.