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The New Age of Imperialism: British and South African Perspectives

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Abstract

We are constantly reminded that we live in an age of global empire and that the United States is the 21st century's new *imperium*. Several well-known commentators, not only those associated with the neo-conservative movement, have welcomed this on the grounds that the United States is best placed to spread ideas of freedom and democracy. Parallels with the British empire abound. This chapter tests such ideas and draws parallels between the invasion of Iraq and the South African war of 1899-1902 in order to do so. It also examines the concept of imperialism and suggests that the hegemony of American empire, like its British counterpart a century ago, is rather more vulnerable to forces of resistance and fragmentation than might seem apparent[1].

The topic of "Empire" is back with us. After a period of relative abeyance, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have forced the issue to the surface – along with new interest in globalisation – and the word appears constantly in editorial columns, books and in public debate. George W. Bush's first term as president was seen by many as marking the triumph of a new form of American imperialism whose ascendancy since the Second World War has been traced in relation to the demise of the British colonial empire and, on some accounts, to the evisceration of the Soviet empire. Those who denounce American imperialism as the embodiment of global oppression and injustice are angrier and more vocal than ever. But there are others who seek to defend American hegemony, arguing from a variety of positions that the spread of Western institutions and cultural values is essential for the maintenance of international order and civilised values. Neoconservatives, like the signatories to the Project for the New American Century have been especially enamoured of this position. In less hawkish tones, writers ranging from the British diplomat Robert Cooper[2] to Michael Ignatieff and Niall Ferguson argue in favour of what they term a "liberal" empire, an empire designed to secure humanitarian objectives and to provide the forces of globalisation with political ballast[3].

Ignatieff and Ferguson, both prominent public intellectuals, are of particular interest because they are also historians. And yet, historians are distinctly in the minority when it comes to discussing the contemporary nature of imperialism. Academic historians guard their patches jealously and are disinclined to draw analogies and parallels between the present and the past; historians habitually shy away from slick generalisations, and tend to disdain decontextualised grand theories, preferring to deal in the currency of probing questions and analytical distinctions. This is a respectable position to adopt but we cannot then complain when others cannibalise the past in order to lay claim to the present. And there is no shortage of prophetic theorists who do so: take, for example, an influential tome on the subject by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, published by Harvard in 2000. They choose to characterise empire – spelt with a capital E of course – as "a decentered and deterritorialising apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command"[4]. Seemingly, the power of this new empire is limitless.

Whether we are in fact in the midst of a new age of imperialism, dominated by the hyper-power of America, is still very much an open question. The debacle of the Iraq aftermath and the political demise of neo-conservatives like Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz may signal a significant shift away from American global interventionism, but, as Zhou Enlai once remarked when asked about the consequences of the French Revolution, it is too early to say. Not so long ago a great deal of attention was devoted to the ideas of the historian Paul Kennedy who warned of the dangers of American "imperial overstretch", suggesting that America was in "relative decline" as a consequence of its vast military expenditure. This was in the mid-1980s when the Cold War was nearing its climax and when the rise of Japanese economic power seemed inexorable. Re-reading Kennedy's projections about how the start of the 21st century might look provides an object lesson in the dangers of predicting future trends. Yet, Kennedy may still be right about the fragility of American global power: the similarities he detects between America's vulnerability at the turn of the 20th century and the British empire's weaknesses in 1900 may not be altogether wide of the mark. Kennedy's final, prospective chapter is also a salutary reminder of the important role of historical contingency. Had Al Gore been declared the winner of the 2000 American election by the Supreme Court, would America be in Iraq and, if not, would charges of imperialism be levelled so readily? And if September 11th had not occurred, might George Bush have reverted to policies of imperious isolationism rather than imperial interventionism?

One further reason to resist pronouncements about American imperialism is that we are living at a time of palpable uncertainty, where reason is not at a premium, and where the broadcast media are quicker to pronounce than to reflect. The ideological vacuum caused in large measure by the implosion of eastern European communism offered wonderful opportunities to provide catch-phrases with which to characterise our age.

Francis Fukuyama's triumphalist announcement of the dawn of a New Order, is a prime example. But the end of communism did not augur either the end of history or the end of ideology. Nor, despite appearances, does it portend its alarmist ideological counterpart, Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations"[5].

The demise of the Soviet Union, which was wholly unanticipated by the strategists who were paid to foresee such things, ought probably to have entailed the winding up of the realist school of international relations. Instead, the mantra of globalisation arrived as a saviour, not only for the right, which readily embraced the idea of minimal states and unbounded markets, but also for those on the left who feared the unrestrained spread of multi-national capitalism. It did not take long, however, for the theoretical limitations and empirical weaknesses of the globalisation model to become apparent. 9/11 posed a particular challenge because it entailed an unprecedented tightening up of national borders and a powerful restatement of national sovereignty. It also focussed attention on the Molloch of Globalisation, the Imperial Republic of the United States (whose response to terrorist attack serves as a reminder that global pretensions and rampant nationalism can all too easily coexist). The inadequacies of globalisation as an explanatory model have therefore encouraged a more scaled down version of the thesis, in particular, the notion that 21st century America is replicating 19th century Britain as an imperial power.

In the not too distant future we may look back on such attempts to define the epoch as symptoms of a more general millenial anxiety, heightened by the breakdown of a bipolar world, propelled by the revolution in information technology, and fuelled by a fracturing of belief in binary logic and enlightenment (of which post-modernism is both cause and symptom). Fear, and often irrational fear, seems to be a defining feature of the current age – yet we lack even the most rudimentary capacity to gauge or calibrate collective danger: Was human life more or less threatened in the cold war world of mutually assured nuclear destruction than it is now in the shadow of the twin towers; Can we comprehend the threat of global climate change? Did we really believe on the eve of the millenium that Y2K would threaten civilisation as we knew it?

Happily, the sense of radical uncertainty that pervades the post-modern millennium has been good to the guild of history. In Britain, so-called "telly-dons" like Simon Schama, David Starkey, and Niall Ferguson have succeeded in restoring a breach between popular and academic history by virtue of their skilful reassertion of narrative order. Evocations of Britain's wartime role – and its empire – have the capacity to offer comforting views of the past, often laced with nostalgia. In the hands of Niall Ferguson, Britain's mostly benevolent empire provides moral absolution for the past together with instructive lessons for the future. For Ferguson, and others like him, the problem with America is not that it is an imperial power but that it is not imperial enough. The shrewd formulation of Slavoj Žižek is closer to the mark: in his view the problem "is not

that the US is a new global empire, but that it isn't one, though it pretends to be. In fact the US continues to act as a nation state, ruthlessly pursuing its own interests"[6].

Our analysis of empire depends to a large extent upon what we mean by it. The great commonwealth historian Keith Hancock argued that "imperialism" is a word "so arrogantly and capriciously used that it has become a positive hindrance to thought"[7] – and advised scholars against its use. But we cannot banish a word simply because we do not like it; it is more helpful instead to consider how changing meanings and uses of the term may be indicative of broad shifts in historical understanding.

In Britain, the idea of empire once meant simply the United Kingdom. Imperialism was frowned upon, not only because it was a disagreeable abstract noun – and a concept at that – but because of its association with strutting continental dictatorships, a contempt for liberty, and a lust for military glory. In the mid-19th century, Britons despised the regime of Louis Bonaparte, which was said to exemplify the evils of imperialism. It was therefore "entirely possible for patriotic, freedom-loving Englishmen to love the British empire while simultaneously hating imperialism – and praying that it might never cross the Channel to threaten their homeland."[8] As the so-called second and third British empires developed, a distinction was drawn between the white dominions of Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand (where forms of responsible self-government were envisaged from as early as the 1830s and 40s) and the dependent empire (eg. India and Africa) where liberty and self-government were seen as distant possibilities at best.

The word "imperialism" began to be used more widely during the late 1870s when it came to serve as a slogan against the British prime minister Disraeli. But it was only in 1878, when the term "jingo" was coined as part of a wave of fierce patriotic sentiment prompted by the Russian advance towards Constantinople, that imperialism came to be adopted as a term of approbation. And yet the view that Britain was not by nature or tradition an imperial power persisted. It was partly in order to challenge this happy state of national denial that the Oxford historian John Robert Seeley famously declared in 1883, at the height of the scramble for Africa, that the British seemed to have "conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind". Seeley wished to remind his contemporaries that empire was a serious reality and that the ideal of a "Greater Britain", a term originally proposed by Charles Dilke, ought to be pursued vigorously. Seeley also wanted to show that empire embodied progress and moral purpose: in particular it marked the victory of liberty and free institutions over despotism and backwardness[9].

In 1878 Gladstone denounced the Tories for having "drunk deeply of the intoxicating beverage of [what he called] the new Imperialism"[10]. Increasingly, however, imperialism was adopted as a badge of honour. Liberals like Rosebery, who had previously denounced imperialism as a version of oriental despotism, now embraced the idea of an

ethically-based imperial mission[11]. By the late 1890s many liberals had become proud imperialists. Thus, in just 20 years "the word had changed" from a term of "abuse" to something approaching a "national gospel". Its reversion to a term of moral revulsion was mainly a result of the Boer War which reopened party divisions, this time on the question of imperialism's relationship to capitalism[12].

Imperialism, understood in its secondary, economic sense, was probably first used in 1898, in the United States, during the Spanish-American War which led to America's annexation of the Philippine Islands – and, indeed, Guantánamo Bay. Norman Etherington has shown how the Bostonian editor of a weekly newspaper, the "United States Investor", "announced his sudden conversion to the cause of 'imperialism'", while observing that the word was "new to [the] political vocabulary". Like most of the financial press, the "Investor" had favoured peace up to this point, on the familiar grounds that war was bad for commerce. Saving "oppressed Cubans from the atrocious rule of the senile Spanish empire did not seem to be a principle worth fighting for"[13]. During the course of the Spanish war, the editor changed his mind, and in an article headlined "The Benefit of the War to Commercial and Financial Interest – How the Thing Will Work", argued that war served to stimulate business by opening up new fields for investment, trade and government contracts. A lengthy discussion ensued in which arguments outlining the economic advantages of imperialism were frankly admitted[14].

Just a year later, in 1899, the outbreak of hostilities in South Africa offered fresh opportunities to debate the merits of imperialism. One of the leading opponents of the war was J.A. Hobson, a radical liberal journalist and economist, who published *Imperialism: A Study* in 1902. Hobson blamed the Boer or South African War on the machinations of a clique of financiers and politicians who were seeking to gain control of the fabulous gold riches of the Transvaal. Abetted by a kept press and by means of clever appeals to jingoistic nationalism, this clique – in which Jews were said to be especially prominent – had been able to persuade the nation that the war was being fought in the interests of all Britons, whereas in fact the war benefited the class and institutional interests of only a tiny minority. Hobson's economic analysis of capitalist imperialism was taken seriously. It was refined by Marxist theoreticians like Bukharin, Kautsky and Luxemburg, but most importantly by Lenin, who linked imperialism with the development of monopoly capitalism. For Lenin, it was the monopoly phase of capitalism that had made the First World War inevitable. Because imperialism was the "highest stage of capitalism" – the title of his famous 1916 wartime tract – it also signalled the imminent collapse of the capitalist system.

This brief exegesis of the word "imperialism" resonates strongly with contemporary discussions. Not only is it evident that terms like "liberal imperialism", the "new imperialism" and "capitalist imperialism" were all debated at length a century ago, it is also striking that the principal protagonists of these discussions were journalists, politicians and historians – and that Britain and the United States were in the forefront of their

thoughts. Just as the Victorians referred back to the Roman Empire for guidance – Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, written at the time of the American Revolution, was a common reference point – so our more reflective commentators today look back to the British empire. Some see the current situation as a re-enactment of the hubris of Suez. Others, with longer memory spans, look back for guidance to the British conquest of Egypt and the Sudan in the 1880s, or, indeed, the occupation of Iraq after the First World War.

At least as compelling an historical example is provided by the Anglo-Boer (or South African) War of 1899-1902, which, for many historians, marks the culmination of Britain's 19th-century pretensions to global dominance and therefore stands as a key "test of empire". On the vexed question of its causation most historians would agree that the desire to control the Transvaal's gold is a vital if not a sufficient explanation of the war. But there can be little doubt that had this remote and mostly poor part of the African interior *no*t been rich in gold, the British empire would probably have passed up the opportunity to fight what turned out to be its costliest war since the defeat of Napoleon. The case of Iraq may be explained similarly. Control of Middle Eastern oilfields is by no means the sole, or even the determining reason for these conflicts, but without the presence of oil it is very doubtful that Saddam Hussein would have been considered worth waging a war against by one Bush, let alone two[15].

If the underlying structural reasons for the Boer and Iraq wars can be compared so, too, can their leading protagonists. The Boer war was provoked by a small tightly-knit group of politicians – men like Rhodes, Milner and Chamberlain – who were every inch the neo-cons of their day. Driven by a conviction that the British empire needed to renew itself in order to survive, these conservatives (in the case of Milner and Chamberlain, Liberal Unionists aligned with the Tories on account of their hostility to home rule for Ireland) were more than visceral reactionaries. They were calculating modernisers, and often conservative idealists, who relished the opportunity to reform the British nation and put it to the test. Their belief in Anglo-Saxon racial destiny may sound anachronistic today; but their promise that the British were destined to bring good government, economic progress and sound institutions to the rest of the world, sounds very familiar.

As a result of the actions of these 19th century neo-cons, Britain became committed to a war that involved nearly half a million imperial troops and which went on far longer than anticipated: the capture of Pretoria, far from ending the conflict, prompted the Boers to enter a prolonged phase of guerilla struggle. The horrors that this involved, which included farm-burnings and concentration camps, were the Abu Ghraibs and Guantánamo Bays of their day; such behaviour aroused widespread international condemnation and led to an admission by the Liberal Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman, that Britain had resorted to "methods of barbarism".

The Boer war deeply divided contemporary opinion. Within Britain pacifists, liberals, non-conformists and anti-capitalists took the moral high ground. They clashed with flag-waving patriots and jingoes who rushed to demonise the Boers. President Kruger, leader of the Transvaal Republic, was widely portrayed as a corrupt and tyrannical feudal potentate who had shamelessly denied British residents of the Transvaal their citizenship rights, so reducing them to the status of "helots". The anti-war movement was rich in passionate anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist rhetoric. The likes of contemporary radicals like George Galloway, Tony Benn and John Pilger sound almost tepid by comparison with their radical forebears a century ago.

Just as today, the liberal left of a century ago was left divided and confused by events. Supporters of the Boer war included many reluctant imperialists, Fabians and socialists amongst them, whose generalised opposition to the manipulations of financiers and plutocrats came to be outweighed by a belief that Kruger had to go in the name of progress and civilisation. In the view of the Fabian intellectual Sidney Webb, for example, the Boer war was wholly unjust and yet wholly necessary. Bernard Shaw took a similar position and wrote *Fabianism and the Empire* to explain why. By contrast, trade-union aligned Labour MPs like Keir Hardie remained resolutely anti-imperial[16].

A century on, these fierce debates resonate strongly in the British left's condemnation of Tony Blair. They are reminiscent in many ways of the conflicts between 19th-century Liberal Imperialists of the Rosebery variety and opponents of imperialism, like Harcourt, who located themselves firmly in the anti-imperialist tradition of Cobden and Gladstone. While many protestant churches opposed the war, millenarian-minded Christians and evangelicals were quick to see the conflict as an "instrument of God's judgement, in which Britain was [cast as] the Almighty's agent"[17]. Religious fundamentalism was evident here too.

For a conflict fought in a distant part of the world, the South African war aroused a huge international outcry. The era of telegraph despatches and mass journalism fed a hunger for news, heroes and scoops. The relief of the sieges of Ladysmith and Mafeking was accompanied by public orgies of patriotic rejoicing, which resulted in the entry into the English language of the verb "to maffick". Some two hundred journalists, Winston Churchill, George Steevens, Leo Amery, Flora Shaw and Arthur Conan Doyle, among them, followed the action or embedded themselves with the troops. In Donal Lowry's opinion, international views of the war were conditioned by the fact that "the British Empire had come to represent the highest stage of capitalist modernity" in what he calls the "first age of 'globalisation' ". Contemporaries saw the conflict "as a struggle between two conflicting global ideologies: British imperialism and capitalism [on one side] *versus* anti-imperialism and nationalism [on the other]"[18].

The war drew Canadians, New Zealanders and Australians in on the side of the British, though it was as much for their own developing sense of nationhood and self-esteem as

for the glory of the empire that representatives from the dominions were fighting. Beyond the empire, international pacifists and humanitarians found common cause with romantic nationalists, who idolised the Boers as noble savages or instinctive republicans. Volunteer detachments including French, Russian, German, Irish, Italian, Dutch, Scandinavians and Americans, fought on the side of the Boers. Irish republicans identified particularly closely with Boer fellow victims of British imperialism: one of these pro-Boer fighters was Major John MacBride of the Transvaal Irish Brigade. He went on to marry another passionate Boer sympathiser, Maud Gonne, ending up as a republican martyr in the 1916 Easter Rising[19].

John and Maud's son, the Nobel prize-winner, anti-colonialist – and anti-apartheid activist – Sean MacBride, slowly broke with family tradition, left the IRA and emerged as a leading figure in the international anti-apartheid movement, though as late as 1954 he presented an ex-Boer rifle with Kruger's profile carved on the stock to the South African High Commissioner to London[20]. Such was the curious bond between Irish and Boer republicanism. In 1986, there was a further twist to the MacBride story: Robert John MacBride, a "coloured" member of the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, was arrested and put on death row in South Africa for his role in the bombing of a Durban pub. By strange irony, Robert John turned out to be a direct descendant of John MacBride[21].

This compressed account of the three-generational story of the MacBrides serves as a reminder that anti-imperialism is an unstable and inconsistent ideology. Many high-minded pro-Boers ignored the trampling of African rights – which was in many ways the most important consequence of the post-war settlement. They only gradually woke up to this fact after the Second World War when Afrikaners became, all too conveniently for a forgetful British liberal conscience, the much mythologised white tribe of Africa. Attitudes to American imperialism betray similar inconsistencies and lie at the heart of American fury with pusillanimous Europe – France in particular. We should recall that the United States' reluctance to enter the Second World War was strongly conditioned by its anti-colonial self-image and its disinclination to defend the British and French empires. Decolonisation and Vietnam changed all that. But the change in the imperial guard means that we might consider whether some of the more sanctimonious anti-American sentiments of today ought to be understood in terms of European discomfort at its diminished role in a post-colonial world.

Historical comparisons are never perfect and parallels can only be indicative. But, staying with the South African example, we may push the analogy one stage further in order to contrast the aftermath of British involvement in South Africa with the current situation in Iraq. Most historians would accept that Britain's phase of hyper-imperialism came to a fairly abrupt end after the South African War. Almost a half century was to elapse before the independence of India set in motion a much wider process of decolonisation, yet the beginnings of the doubt and retreat that began this process can

be traced back to the bruising experience of the South African War. Only time will tell whether Iraq and Afghanistan mark the high point of American global influence, or the start of a new phase in America's worldwide projection of power[22].

One thing we can be relatively sure of is that Britain handled the reconstruction of South Africa rather better than the US coalition has managed in Iraq. Just eight years after the treaty that ended the conflict, South Africa became a self-governing (but effectively independent) unitary state under the leadership of two ex-Boer War generals, Botha and Smuts. For some historians this proved that Britain won the war only to lose the peace. This conclusion is oversimplified. Although Britain lost direct control of the country after 1910, vital economic and strategic interests were secured eg., British use of the naval base at Simonstown and significant holdings in the mining and industrial sector). In both world wars South Africa fought on the side of the empire, notwithstanding massive opposition from hard-line Afrikaner republicans. Jan Smuts duly became a stalwart of the Commonwealth, perhaps its most lionised figure. He helped to inspire the Covenant of the League of Nations and had a hand in the making of the United Nations too. One of Smuts' great adversaries in South Africa was Mahatma Gandhi, who volunteered as a stretcher bearer for the British during the South African War and began his early experiments in passive resistance while opposing the South African government's moves to restrict Indian land ownership in the Transvaal.

Though the trajectories of their lives could not be more different, Smuts and Gandhi went on to play key roles as post-colonial nation-builders and both leaders enjoyed high regard as symbols of world freedom. Smuts' claim to be a champion of freedom was, to say the least, narrowly based, and even Gandhi's avatar has been tarnished. Yet, in different ways and in different circumstances Smuts and Gandhi both won their reputations through opposing imperialism and then coming to terms with it, in such a way that they helped to lay the foundations of a post imperial world. It is unlikely that the Karzais and Allawis, lacking popular legitimacy and hastily shuttled into government by a nervous occupying power, will be remembered as anything other than American stooges. They have proved incapable of releasing America from its imperial entanglements. And this continues to be a source of great instability.

Broadening this discussion from the South African case study, historians of empire and commonwealth would cite several structural differences between Britain and America in their capacity as imperial powers. The first, and most striking, is that Britain was predominantly successful as a colonial occupying power. Britain's informal empire, that is to say, its *economic* sphere of influence, stretched well beyond those parts of the map coloured in red: Latin America and parts of China in particular. But it is Britain's accumulated record in colonial governance that distinguishes it most acutely from America's limited experience of direct rule. The United States' global reach is most forcefully expressed in terms of economic, military and cultural influence and only to a very limited extent through formal territorial acquisition.

The standard distinction between imperialism and colonialism, alluded to here, is often lost in contemporary discussions. Direct foreign rule is very different from diffuse notions of hegemony or influence. These qualitatively different forms of domination provoke qualitatively different responses. Britain's colonial empire, it should be remembered, developed over centuries. As a small island on the north-western fringes of Europe, it could only spread incrementally through forging alliances with indigenous elites and powers. It is astonishing to consider that British India was governed by a tiny cadre of approximately 1,000 professional administrators attached to the Indian Civil Service. Kenya, in 1947, was administered by fewer than 200 colonial officers.

Underlying the "thin white line" of colonial administration was the system of Indirect Rule. This version of the "light touch" was a form of administration whereby power was diffused through local intermediaries and functionaries. It was status-based and strongly hierarchical. The time-honoured practice of Divide and Rule meant that competing subject groups generally neutralised each other, while the army or police ensured that the balance of power was maintained in favour of colonial authority – the so-called pax-Britannica.

Historians of empire rightly lay stress on the importance of collaboration with indigenous peoples. The word has an intriguing double-meaning since collaboration can imply cooperation as well as complicity. Either way, the fact of mutual dependence meant that Britain's subject peoples often enjoyed considerable autonomy. Studies of the so-called dependent empire in Africa and India have devoted a great deal of attention to the complex forms of social and historical agency that determined the real lived relations of colonisers and colonised. Domination was seldom complete, hegemony had constantly to be achieved. The subaltern was neither silent nor passive. Another way of putting this is that the British empire, though relatively weak, was resilient, because it mostly recognised the limits of its power. Indeed, if success is measured by longevity and endurance, the most successful empires may be said to be characterised by the possession of decisive rather than absolute power.

This paradox does not seem to be sufficiently appreciated by those who either romanticise the British empire or seek to shape a putative American empire in the image of its British forerunner. Both Niall Ferguson's claim that America should wake up to its imperial responsibilities by learning from the British, and Robert Nye's suggestion that America should adopt techniques of "soft power" based on gentle persuasion[23], sit uneasily with the fact that America is a superpower which currently dominates the world as no nation-state ever has before; moreover, the United States seems more comfortable with being a super- than a supra-national state[24]. Unless the United States seeks to become a colonial empire, which is extremely doubtful, there are few compelling reasons for it to exercise power through subtle forms of hegemony, and probably not enough time to do so in any case, before its outright economic and military supremacy is challenged by countries like China. One might add that another vital ingredient for

colonial-style empires has gone: the existence of intricate pre-modern social hierarchies with their supporting cultural tissue of deference and paternalism. These structures allowed the British to imagine their empire as a vast feudal estate and facilitated colonial officers' interaction with, and understanding of, parallel local elites. Plainly, such relations no longer pertain in an age where global democratic consumerism and nationalist assertion have expunged forever the mystique of power and position that David Cannadine refers to as "ornamentalism"[25].

No mainstream British historian has done more to foreground the question of empire in recent years than Niall Ferguson. His study of the British empire has not been well received by experts in the field. But, whatever one concludes about his overly sympathetic and often nostalgic interpretation of Britain's apparently liberal empire, Ferguson has rendered an important service by restoring the topic to a central position in British and European history, not least in his view of the world wars as imperial conflagrations. Indeed, if one dispenses with the introduction and conclusion to Ferguson's provocatively titled *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* – whose calculated iconoclasm is often at odds with the evidence he adduces – we are left with nothing less than a compelling and mostly sensible reading of key works in imperial and commonwealth history[26].

Hopefully, this is indicative of a reconnection between the spheres of (domestic) British and imperial historiography. For much of the 20th century, and certainly in the post-war era, the imperial and British historians had little to say to each other. The experience of decolonisation in the 1950s and 60s, and the sense of national failure that attended it, had the effect of reinforcing traditions of historical "little Englands", a term which came to prominence during the Boer war and which carries with it the idea that empire is an excrescence, an aberration, or merely an embarrassment in the long sweep of English history. Interestingly, "Little Englandism" enjoys both a left and a right wing pedigree: its left-wing strain can be traced from the laissez faire and pacifist doctrines of Cobden and Bright, through J.A. Hobson, John Morley and Goldwin Smith, and also in the writings of A.J.P. Taylor who regarded the empire as being of little consequence to Britain's domestic story[27]. Such insular reflexes are also apparent in a great deal of cultural and social history or "history from below", not least in attempts to argue that ordinary people cared little for empire in their daily lives[28].

For the political right the idea of the English (or British) as an "island race", fortuitously separated from Europe and naturally superior to it, has had obvious appeal. ("Minding Britain's Business" was a popular slogan of the British Union of Fascists during the 1930s)[29]. Inter-war appeasement drew on similar assumptions. In Max Beloff's view, "The British were not an imperially-minded people; they lacked both a theory of empire and the will to engender and implement one"[30]. End of story.

Fortunately, this is not the end of the story. In 1975 the New Zealand-born intellectual historian J.G.A. Pocock wrote a powerful manifesto in which he criticised A.J.P. Taylor's wilful insularity, arguing instead that British history should be written in terms of the "intercultural" story of "conflict and crossbreeding between societies differently based"[31]. Since then groundbreaking works have been published by leading historians including Linda Colley, David Cannadine, Norman Davies and Catherine Hall[32]. To this list one should add the names of a younger generation of historians amongst whom we should number Andrew Thompson, Stuart Ward, Alan Lester and Zoë Laidlaw. One of the important messages of these writers is that British identity cannot be understood by reference to the United Kingdom alone[33]. Britons made themselves both in relation to Europe and in the context of their imperial experience. One of the functions of empire was to provide a broad stage for the expression and performance of Britishness, and within that notions of Irishness, Scottishness – as well as that most understated but persistent of nationalisms, Englishness. This was well understood by late-19th-century commentators like J.A. Froude and Anthony Trollope who toured the empire in order to promote and to reflect upon the meaning of British national identity. Rudyard Kipling famously put this in terms of a rhetorical question: "What should they know of England who only England know?"

In the field of social history, the work of John Mackenzie and the Manchester University Press series that he inspired, deserve special mention. Mackenzie's original collection on popular imperialism has been followed by studies on imperial propaganda, on literature and theatre, soldiering, masculinity, gender, travel, medicine, science, hunting and conservation. Linking these diverse contributions is the simple but surely incontestible claim that imperialism "had as significant an effect on the dominant as on the subordinate societies"[34].

The latest British-based scholarship seeks to cast the imperial experience in global terms, stressing empire – or empires – as fields of interaction, of mutual influences, of complex networks and circuits. Christopher Bayly's major intervention into global history, *The Birth of the Modern World: Global Connections and Comparisons* (2004), is an outstanding example. John Darwin's *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire* (2007) is another major study. Bayly encourages us to transcend the limits of national history and to adopt a multi-centric view of world historical change, one that does not assume the rise of western dominance and is ever alert to challenges *to* such dominance. His work begins in the era of the French revolution and ends in 1914, but it speaks eloquently to our moment: it poses radical questions about cherished Western presumptions and adds analytical sophistication as well as time-depth to contemporary concerns with globalisation, modernity, religion and imperialism. There are few better demonstrations of how the study of history, rooted in context but expansive, global and international in scope, can serve as a guide to our understanding of the present[35].

A conspicuous weakness of metropolitan-based theories of globalisation is the tendency to view the non-European world in homogenous, totalising terms – which is ironical given the professed identification of anti-globalists with the mute victims of imperialism. Sadly, quite a lot of the literature inspired by Edward Said's orientalist thesis, and a great deal of writing on globalisation, unwittingly reproduce these totalising tendencies, seemingly oblivious to what should be self-evident: that only a grounded historical, anthropological, and literary engagement with extra-European societies can explain and understand their particularity. There are simply no short-cuts. As Anthony Hopkins puts it, if globalisation is to be more than a reprise of "the rise of the West – and the fall of the rest" only a truly *global* history of globalisation will suffice[36].

This point underlines the need to understand global (and imperial) history at multiple societal levels. One of the weaknesses of Niall Ferguson's "anglobalisation" approach is that it is mainly concerned with the outward spread of ideas, institutions, and financial systems from the towering heights of imperial policy and practice. The top-down approach means that there is far too little attention to zones of interaction at multiple levels and at different scales. The successes of British imperialism until mid-way through the 20th century, such as they were, had much to do with its appreciation of the power of what were termed "traditional societies" and, indeed, the capacity of the colonial state to manipulate such knowledge. This was an intrinsic assumption of the cultural relativism that underwrote indirect rule with its accompanying slogans of the Dual Mandate and the White Man's Burden.

Ferguson ends his most recent book on American imperialism, *Colossus: The price of America's Empire*, with wistful quotes from Kipling's *White Man's Burden* (though he covers himself by saying that such archaic language may not be appropriate for the building of the 21st-century liberal American empire that he so heartily endorses). He charges American policy-makers, who "lack the imperial cast of mind", with a failure to see their project through and advises that note should be taken of British precedents. But Ferguson seems wilfully ignorant of the fact that indirect rule, which formed the basis of its empire in Africa and India, dissolved as a direct consequence of the very capitalist market relations that he so fulsomely welcomes. Nor does he recognise that industrialisation, urbanisation and market-based modernity created the conditions within which modern mass nationalism could flourish. Ferguson fails to appreciate this because his view of empire remains entirely metro-centric and top-down: it is a perspective that allows him to avoid any consideration of *the internal dynamics* of what he and others so glibly dismiss as the third world's "failed states".

The British colonial office made similar miscalculations in the post-war era. So certain and, indeed, *dependent* was the British empire on the *otherness* of the other, that it was confounded when modern nationalists wrong-footed their masters by speaking back in the language of universal rights and freedoms. Paradoxically, American imperialism in its neo-conservative guise is vulnerable for precisely the opposite reason: it inhabits

a manichean world of good and bad, one that takes no account of the history, culture, language or values of those it seeks so eagerly to convert to individual freedom and collective democracy. It is captive to Iraqi and Afghan leaders who cynically parrot its mantras but blind to, and hastily dismissive of those who do not. Iraq provides a paradigm example of this self-deceiving cultural and historical tunnel vision. For this reason as well as a host of others, the neo-conservative vision of America's global destiny is manifestly bound to end in failure even more rapidly than its earlier, British model.

Notes

[1] My thanks to Mary Harris and Donal Lowry for their comments on this text.

[2] *Why we Still Need Empires* in "The Observer", 7 April 2002; or see the journalism of Christopher Hitchens, collected in *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq,* New York 2003.

[3] See e.g. M. Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan,* London 2003; N. Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the modern world* London 2003 Id., *Colossus: The price of America's empire,* London 2004.

[4] M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Empire,* Harvard 2000, p. xii. See F. Cooper *Empire Multiplied. A Review Essay* in "Contemporary Studies in Society and History", 46, 2, 2004, who refers to them as "anarcho-Marxists" (p. 248).

[5] S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?* in "Foreign Affairs", Summer 1993, 72, 3, pp. 22-49.

[6] *London Review of Books*, 17 September 2004, 26, p. 12.

[7] W.K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, Vol. II, Part 1, London 1942, pp. 1-2.

[8] N. Etherington, *Theories of imperialism: war, conquest and capital,* London 1984, p. 6.

[9] W.R. Louis, *Introduction*, *Oxford History of the British Empire,* Vol. V, Oxford 1999, p. 8.

[10] R. Koebner, H.D. Schmidt, *Imperialism. The story and significance of a political word 1840-1960,* Cambridge 1965, p. 157.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.,* p. 221.

[13] Etherington, *Theories* cit., p. 7.

[14] *Ibid*., pp. 7 and ff. Cf. Koebner, Schmidt, *Imperialism* cit., p.p. 236-7.

[15] Cf. T. Benn, "The Guardian", 22 September 2004: "The real reason for the invasion was to topple Saddam, seize the oil and establish permanent US bases to dominate the region. And we know that Tony Blair privately shared these objectives, and used the weapons issue to persuade parliament and public".

[16] B. Porter, *Critics of Empire*, London 1968, p. 137.

[17] G. Cuthbertson, *Preaching Imperialism: Wesleyan Methodism and the War,* in D. Omissi, A. Thompson (eds.), *The Impact of the South African War,* Basingstoke 2002, p. 157.

[18] D. Lowry, *"The World's no Bigger than a Kraal": The South African War and international opinion in the first age of "globalization",* in Omissi, Thompson, *The Impact* cit., pp. 270, 271.

[19] D. Lowry, *"The Boers were the beginning of the end"? The wider impact of the South African War*, in Id. (ed.), *The South African War Reappraised* Manchester 2000, pp. 212-3.

[20] *Ibid*., p. 239. Lowry, personal communication, points out that MacBride Jr wanted to commemorate the Irish Transvaal Brigade with a monument in Johannesburg in 1948. By the 1950s the IRA and the broader republican movement had 'forgotten' its pro-Boer past.

[21] E. Boehmer, in *Bloodlines,* Cape Town 2000, has told this remarkable story in novelistic form. One of her characters repeats as a refrain: "we carry our cocked-up history inside us."

[22] E. Todd, *After the Empire*, London 2002, p. xviii.

[23] R. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,* New York 2004.

[24] True, 19th-century nationalism and new imperialism were closely associated. But the "greater Britain" propounded by imperialists like Seeley was to a considerable extent intended to be trans-national.

[25] D. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their Empire*, London 2001.

[26] Ferguson, *Empire* cit.

[27] J. Mackenzie, introduction to *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, Manchester 1986, p. 2.

[28] The fullest recent statement is B. Porter, *The Absent-minded imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain*, Oxford 2004. For a critique see Stuart Ward's introduction to *British Culture and the End of Empire,* Manchester 2001, p. 4.

[29] E. Green, M. Taylor, *Further thoughts on little Englandism*, in R. Samuel, *Patriotism* Vol. 1, London 1989, p. 103.

[30] *Ibid.,* p. 19.

[31] J.G.A. Pocock, *British History: A plea for a new subject* in "Journal of Modern History", 1975, 47, pp. 604-5.

[32] Note, however, that leading imperial and commonwealth historians like Peter Marshall and Shula Marks have themselves made similar points.

[33] For a good statement of the new approach to Britishness and the "British World" as an integrated concept, see the special issue of the "Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History" 31, 2 (2003) edited by Carl Bridge and Kent Federowich.

[34] General statement in "Studies in Imperialism" series.

[35] Such work, one hopes, will help to counter a growing provincialism in British public life, from which universities are sadly not immune. As Martin Jacques has noted, it is paradoxical that while globalisation has "made the world interdependent to an extent never imagined in the past", post-imperial Britain seems to be becoming "deeply parochial" and self-absorbed. Martin Jacques, *Our problem with abroad*, "The Guardian" 21 August 2004.

[36] A.G. Hopkins, *Introduction* to Id. (ed.), *Globalization in World History*, London 2002, p. 2.

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