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Level: Master I
Field of Study: Literature and Civilisation
Module: British Civilisation
Lecture Title: The End of The British Empire

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]. One may 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.'

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]

Such positive and peaceful vision of the end of Empire is sharply contested by other historians. 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'

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'etat, 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 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.

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* 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. In parts, he argues, British imperial rule was often benign and he denies that the crimes of the British Empire can be likened to the systematic genocides and famines of the 20th century. The historians Niall Ferguson and Andrew Roberts have defended the record of the British Empire in even stronger terms. For Roberts the Empire was 'an exemplary force for good'.

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]