The rise and fall of the british empire

History, Empires

The British Empire was the first genuinely global empire, an empire that ranged, at times, from the American colonies in the West, Australia and New Zealand in the East, Canada and her dominions in the North and huge chunks of Africa in the South, including Egypt and Rhodesia. These huge landmasses, and many other smaller islands and places besides, were to be shaped, controlled, dominated and otherwise brought under the dominion of a nation which, prior to colonial ambitions, was a small and perhaps dull and uninspiring set of countries.

Where do we begin? At the beginning far from Britain being historically a never-ending line of tyrants and wayward rulers, Britain has been, to some degree at any rate, a parliamentary democracy that reigned in kings and queens and rulers, and was the first to have a popular revolution, under Cromwell, in Europe. The Englishmen who started the first serious forays into venture capitalism, were little more than pirates and adventurers who plundered the Spanish Main, and wanted a slice of the wealth flowing out of the New World, of which ventures were often backed by Royal decree. Here begins the roots of the British Empire.

From ideas of empire rose the ideas of capitalism, free trade, enforced labour, rigid hierarchies, the criminalization of the poor, and severe and almost unquestioned divides between those who had and those who did not have, both at home and abroad. That this process made many people seriously wealthy cannot be disproved, that it also made many many more people far worse off is, in reality, more important an issue to deal with.

That the legacies of empire are far reaching can be seen only too clearly in places like Ireland, Africa, India and much of the Middle East at this present time. It is when racism and prejudice are broached, that the Empire seems to come into its own; Ireland was the first serious attempt by the British Crown and Parliament, to begin a process of English colonization, whose colonists would then take over the ' wilderness' of Ireland and use the land more profitably. The Irish were treated like the native ' Indians' a little later in America, as being ' in the way', nomads who were uncivilized, and, more importantly, who did not utilize, and particularly, did not ' own' the land they wandered. This is an important point to understand, and much rests on this ' belief', both in Ireland, America and much later Africa and other nations. The inference being, in English and British mindsets, that because nobody ' owned' the land, it was up for grabs. A simple point, but much strenuous, and was the intellectual argument for such colonialism. The Englishman was a gentleman, the Irishman, and henceforth many other nationalities, was vulgar and uncultured brute. This ' excuse', compounded with other often faulty reasoning and intellectualizing, was the reason why Englishmen sought to establish colonies that would make them enormous profits, buy themselves into the gentry, win fame and glory, and establish their names. Such ideas of development being used to excuse ethnic cleansing, land grabbing, slavery and untold injustices have their reflections in most if not all empires, and are seen clearest in the ' nazification' of early 20th century Germany; when notions of superior and inferior excused the most barbarous and evil of practices.

Africa only really became a serious issue to the Empire at the end of the 19th century, but for centuries prior to this, was a source of wealth for Britain and Europe, primarily because of the slave trade, but also as a market for European goods, and as another outpost of European colonialism from the early 1600's. According to Iggy Kim and Peter Boyle, in their article â€ËœHow the rich invented racism′, racism has its historical roots in the development of capitalism. Two other factors assisted the advance of racist ideas in the 19th century: the expansion of European capitalism to include huge colonial empires in Asia and Africa, and the development of early theories of human evolution. Gross manipulation of the latter helped justify the new global oppressive relations of imperialism.

Ports like Liverpool, Bristol, Cardiff and Glasgow, amongst no doubt many others, grew rich and powerful as a result of this trade, allowing merchants to expand, bankers to grow wealthy, companies to prosper, and many individuals to make more money than they knew what to do with; it was indeed a profitable trade, and also, more and more, a trade that is hidden from history. It is no exaggeration to say that the slave trade, and the profits it created, helped cement the emergence of Capitalism, Britain's pre-eminence as a world empire, the beginnings of Britain's industrialization, and the creation of a class of capitalists with untold wealth and power at their fingertips. Such unequal relations of wealth and power, creating vast divisions in Britain and around the world, would become uncomfortable realities for many people, and sooner or later would be justified or explained away in high-blown intellectual and scientific terms.

Desmond Kuah, of the National University of Singapore, writes that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the British Empire was the largest and richest empire in the world. This naturally gave rise to the belief that the British themselves were the chosen race chosen to bring the benefits of western civilization to the backward areas of the world. With India's conquest, in ways militarily, economic, social, ethnic and even religious, came then, as with other dominions, justifications and intellectual reasoning about British, and White European, ' natural' superiority and the ' natural' inferiority of conquered people's around the world.

Anthony S. Wohl, Professor of History at Vassar College writes that during the nineteenth century theories of race were advanced both by the scientific community and in the popular daily and periodical press. In his article The Function of Racism in Victorian, England Professor Wohl goes on to argue that " to denigrate or point up the bestial, brute, savage nature of an outside group is to point up our own advanced state and protect ourselves against inner fears or tensions. Racism and class prejudice, in other words, not only serve as agents of political power, but also serve as buffers between a community and a nature that seems to be getting too close to it for psychological comfort."

The Fall of the British Empire now, I wish to look at how Britain's decline as a world empire, effectively in the middle of the 20th century, was and has been in many cases a smokescreen for Britain's continued economic domination of large parts of the globe, and how Britain itself to this very day exercises divisions and injustices that impoverish large sections of the British

populace, both ethnic British and other ethnic minorities. And how tying all this together, and at its very heart, there is a moral vacuum at the heart of those who control mass wealth and power at all costs, even the cost of a peaceful world.

. The story of the British Empire, now as well as then, is the story of how this power was and is wielded to create class and wealth divisions in Britain, and how these divisions were and are promoted around the world, in ' superior' white and ' inferior' natives and dark-skinned peoples of the world, all for an agenda of mass profit and wealth creation for a relative few, and the vastly unequal power relations such wealth creates, in Britain and the rest of the world. How these divisions are promoted, accepted, subtly held onto, and reinforced by supposedly benign British institutions like the Church of England, the Judiciary, the Armed Forces with their rigid class structures and so on.

And just as Britain, like America, has traditionally backed right-wing dictators and right-wing monarchies and powers in other countries around the world, those regimes often denying even basic rights to the mass of their own people, so Britain has learnt these injustices well, and kept large amounts of British people in the dark, and in poor paying jobs, in run-down areas economically, whilst allowing other groups to prosper often unjustly at the expense of those who are politically, economically and socially oppressed. Sound familiar? I expect it does.

In Liverpool at this present time, one of the major ports at the height of Britain's imperial power, the reality of wealth creation, and of British

civilization and British society is unveiling itself in ' Regeneration' and the much-touted ' Capital of Culture'. Liverpool is a working class city, a town that, whilst a relative few made fortunes and good livings, has been a city traditionally poor, with low paying employment and few real prospects for the average citizen, both historically and at this time. The ball starts rolling when rich people can make more money, and most Liverpool people, those born-and-bred, and many more besides, see in Regeneration a cynical exercise in money making, and another gravy train for overpaid yuppies, consultants, city councilors, politicians and speculators of all kinds and of every hue. I have personally interviewed lots of people in the city centre who have said they are being sidelined, and basically booted out of the city to make way for overpriced restaurants and trendy wine bars, and higher paying rents. This is just another in the long phase of injustice meted out by British wealth and power. That of poor and ordinary people being sidelined to make some rich people even richer, and of all the injustice and hypocrisy that all this entails; low wage economies in the world's 4th richest country, higher taxes for poor people, higher prices in Britain, an average wage in Liverpool of £9000 after the billions flooding in from Europe over the last decade and perhaps more. You may well ask why, in all of these capitalist speculations, a little more of the huge wealth floating around cannot be shared a little more fairly. And therein, in these questions, are answers to be found. They are uncomfortable answers, but true all the same, and they all point to greed, hypocrisy, injustice, breathtaking double-standards, corruption in places high and low and willful immorality.

The aftermath of the British Empire can be seen clearly around the world, and in Britain itself, divided by unjust class and racist systems, and particularly in the ' gold rush' speculations of Liverpool's Capital of Culture. Its heart is empty, and its morals are non-existent.

The aftermath of the British Empire can be seen clearly around the world,