

# Decline and fall of empires in the world history essay

[History](#), [Empires](#)



Published on the Cappuccino Culture page of the Spectator web site on 23rd November 2009 under the heading ‘ Decline and Fall’ is an animated cartoon representing the relative sizes of empires from 1800 until the present day.

[i]Each empire is represented by a blob that either increases or decreases in size over the period. The collapse of the red blob representing the British Empire, the biggest, is of course marked in the period from the end of the First World War. The only comment this web page elicits is one which notes, “ this was not interesting .....you stole three and a half minutes of my life”. I offer this counter factual observation at the start of an essay which will set out to show that the British public do indeed have an interest – of sorts – in the history of their empire, but one that perhaps is not entirely at one with the views of historians. As a listener’s comment on the BBC Radio 4 history of the empire puts it,[ii]“ half the world may hate the English for the success that was the empire, the other half for the scourge inflicted upon them, but please stop it with the apologies”. Put simply my argument is that while post colonial theories of empire may still be in the van for academics, the British public’s view has developed a more Whigish tendency born of nostalgia. Niall Fergusson has come to be portrayed as the primary advocate of the notion of the benefits of empire.

Niall Fergusson’s book, “ Empire: how Britain made the modern world”, [iii]was accompanied by a television series on Channel 4. The success of the programme was to set up its presenter alongside the likes of Simon Schama and Kenneth Clarke, as a well known personality with his own cult of popularity. For Fergusson it raised a profile which is now established in neo-conservative circles in the US, and he has become a prolific commentator on

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current affairs for a number of media outlets. He is widely recognised as clever and provocative, and has continued to develop his controversial argument that the British empire was good for the world.[iv] While Fergusson's forte is undoubtedly economics and finance, an area of scholarship where much of his other publications are situated, he does not skimp on ranging across the panoply of empire history including setting out where the British empire went wrong – the horrors of slavery or the brutality that occurred at the Battle of Omdurman. In asking whether the empire was on balance good or bad, his view can be summed in his own words that, “ no organisation has done more to promote the free movement of goods, capital and labour than the British empire in the 19th and 20th centuries. And no organisation has done more to impose western norms of law, order and governance around the world”.[v]

A Gallup poll taken in 1998 found a British populace who were unapologetic about the Empire. As the Economist noted, the politically correct idea that there was something shameful about colonising large swaths of the world had little resonance amongst the public.[vi] This was the same year that Tony Blair was busily articulating Britain as, ‘ Cool Britannia’, a model 21st century nation to the Labour party conference. Whilst 60% of those polled regretted the empire's passing, only 13% thought that the country could have retained its imperial possessions if it had wished. But the way Tony Blair talked about empire had changed to reflect this public mood. It had developed from what had been the normal reference in the leaders' conference speech to decolonisation. By the 1997 conference the creation of a significant empire

was one of a long list of British achievements. A minor change but perhaps significant given the New Labour ability at the time to sense and articulate the centre ground of the electorate.

It is a tautological statement to say that nations develop differing narratives of their imperial legacy. Such narratives will help shape contemporary popular views. In particular, it will colour the judgement as to whether the loss of an empire was viewed as a defeat, and if so, whether there was a consequential impact on perceptions of national self esteem. Kumar's comparison of the French and English experience is instructive.[vii]He notes that for the English the distinction between past and present is pointless: the future is viewed through the resource of a thoroughly assimilated history. This is contrasted with the turbulence of recent French history where the past remains alive. The result for Kumar is that the French now have a significant tradition of self reflection which manifests itself in a strong sense of nationalism and national identity. He contrasts this strongly with the English case. And in considering this more specifically within the context of empire, the overall French perception was driven by their not being as successful as their imperial competitors, in either the scale of the empire they achieved, or the subsequent management of decolonisation.

The end of the British Empire was not only rapid but also remarkably peaceful, notwithstanding some outbreaks of nationalist hostility. It was not accompanied by radical political upheaval: in Britain itself, all was calm. The British had seeming accepted the collapse of their empire with an equanimity bordering on indifference,[viii]which was a contrast with France

and Portugal, where decolonisation was followed by political convulsion at home. As David Cannadine cogently puts it in a book of essays on Britain's adjustment to the loss of empire, "the British Empire may have been won in a 'fit of absence of mind', but as far as the majority of the population seems to have been concerned, it was given away in a fit of collective indifference". [ix] This is not a nation grieving a collective sense of loss.

But such analysis maybe a little too simple. There could have been in the popular British psyche a deliberate trade off between the perceived benefits of keeping the empire as opposed to the alternatives. The eclipse of empire could have passed unnoticed against a backdrop to a shattering of the faith of imperial markets which occurred before decolonisation took place, and then after 1945 the social priorities that were accorded to the welfare state and industrial intervention to deliver material improvement. [x] It is clear this argument can be developed further to include other events in post war Britain such as the European Union dimension, and the unwillingness or ability to afford high levels of defence expenditure and its consequential impact. The reorientation from the east to Europe was well on the way by 1998 as the Gallup survey noted. 50% thought Europe rather than the empire meant more to Britain. [xi]

A further complication to the popular view of empire can be developed, which is a tapestry of opinion that reflects the internal boundaries of the United Kingdom. The title of Condor and Abell's work says it all in this regard, "Romantic Scotland, tragic England, ambiguous Britain". [xii] The conclusions from the interviews that formed the basis of the research showed that in

Scotland, respondents inferred heroic national character from Scotland's role in the Empire. Whereas in England, the story of empire was understood to represent a product of excessive nationalism. However, the concept of "Britishness" was in both groups understood to predate and postdate the history of empire. This is in fact just another way of saying that as a nation the British had assimilated the empire – rise and fall – to their own historical narrative.

A consequence of the decolonising experience in Britain appears to have been that the recent teaching of history is devoid of content when it comes to the empire. Indeed if I recall both my O and A level history courses in the late 1970s, empire did not prominently figure. Such a notion was explored by a Prince of Wales' summer school in 2003. The rub of the question was that if European imperialism was the most important historical trend of the 19th century, and the British Empire was the biggest and most important of the empires, why did it not figure more prominently in schools' teaching? As the Guardian reported, schools do week after week of British social history and only one week on the empire. In terms of significance it is not enough.

[xiii]

The knowledge of empire amongst a generation now one step removed from the Second World War and the decolonisation afterward is too superficial.

Our 'aggravation' Fergusson summed the point,[xiv]" we can teach the British Empire without saying it's either a good or a bad thing. It is both good and bad. One simply needs to know about it – how it arose and how it declines. These questions aren't in anyway politically loaded. There's an

incredible hangover from the 60s left that says anything about empire must be bad. I'm in no way pushing my own interpretation of empire. Its just that it should be at the core of what we teach people about modern history".

The reluctance of schools to teach the history of empire and even more the examination boards to set the syllabus is bamboozling and rather smacks of avoidance. But avoidance as a consequence of what – embarrassment at the event or the analysis? An Ofsted report on the teaching of history in schools questioned whether a lesson on empire in a three year history course was sufficient given the subject's significance and concluded it was not.[xv]It found that pupils aged 16 would have had 3 or 4 lessons on the subject of empire in their previous 5 years at school. But this is not about providing a unitary explanation of empire in the classroom. The advice Ofsted gave to schools was that pupils should know about the empire and that it has been interpreted by historians and others in different ways.

However, others in education were more strident in their criticisms. Dr Andrew Cunningham, a teacher, argued that while the empire might be forgotten in the UK, around the world this was far less likely to be the case where the imperial legacy was the English language, a strong sense of liberty, an impartial legal system and stable parliamentary government. [xvi]He also noted that the legacy lived on within the UK with an ethnically diverse populace drawn from across the former colonies and living together in relative harmony.

In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world the existence of old links between peoples, such as language and law, are fundamental building blocks for future relationships. They together with immigration to Britain are important legacies from empire. The Commonwealth bruised and battered in the 1960s and 1970s retains a surprising utility as a dense global network of informal connections, valued by its numerous small states.[xvii] Whether or not this judgement shows a transition in the historical analysis of the empire by the BBC is only a question that the corporation itself might answer. But the analysis has moved on from that of an earlier BBC website for school children which starkly noted,[xviii]“ the Empire came into greatness by killing lots of people ..... and stealing their countries”.

The issue of hindsight is key in considering historical perspective, and that is as true for analysis of the British Empire as for other events in the past. Time and distance aid the historian by answering the question of what happened next. It is only in the recent 10 to 20 years that histories of the British Empire can begin to be written by those for whom the ideology of decolonisation is a historical phenomenon. Now they are able to judge the claims and successes of what the Ghandis and company of the world constructed as well as assailed.[xix] In chronological terms, Fergusson fits neatly into the category of young historians that Richenberg had identified and to whom he offered such a proposition. As he says, many of the sins of dictatorship, tribalism and exploitation which the British committed in Africa have been overshadowed by those of their colonial successors. It is not that this legitimises the wrongs of the Empire, but it makes it easier for many to attempt to interpret what



was a liberal empire as an intellectually flawed but not dishonourable attempt to solve problems. With little adjustment such observations would suffice for a publishing editor's summary for the back cover of Fergusson's book.

While retrospection is an aid to comparative analysis it is also an equally useful tool for those who believe the legacies of empire might not always be viewed quite so benignly through such an optic. Jack Straw, when Foreign Secretary, identified Britain's imperial past as the cause of many of the modern world's political problems, including the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Kashmir dispute.[xx]Fergusson, perhaps predictably commented that Mr Straw was " guilty of chanting the old National Union of Students refrain " we are to blame"".[xxi]Conversely though, there is a view for example that the partition in India/Pakistan was now far more important as the defining context for contemporary and future politics, than the legacy of the empire. Perhaps while retrospection helps it does need to be treated with a degree of caution. It is always easy to be wise after the event or as Barry Buzan from the LSE noted in the same article, " like looking back at a game of chess; it's much easier afterwards to work out what the moves should have been". In doing so he captured the views of other historians such as Andrew Roberts and J B Kelly.

This gradual development of the view of Empire from apologist during decolonisation to now more benignly contemplative is most clearly reflected in the Commonwealth. Here former colonies are individual nations bonding of their own volition as equals. It shows too that the assimilation of history into

a continuous narrative is not solely a British experience. As an institution during the 60s and 70s the Commonwealth was viewed by most as an irrelevance. Indeed during the 1980s, Britain was isolated over its stance on South Africa. Now it is a family of 54 member countries with membership across all the world's continents, including 1.8 billion people, or 30% of the world's population. Extraordinarily 50% of that combined population are under 25 and so, many are in some cases 2 or 3 generations removed from direct experience of colonial rule.[xxii]

The Royal Commonwealth Society's website describes how all its members are united by agreed common values, principles, heritage and language. They also share similar systems of law, public administration and education and work together in a spirit of cooperation, partnership and understanding. The increasing status of the organisation is such that membership continues to grow to countries that were outside British colonial rule, for instance Rwanda. There is a binding of human experience and values implicit in what the Society says: it is not unrealistic or even nostalgic about the past but in effect says, we are where we are, let's look forward. Given the ethnic diversity of the British population, the Commonwealth is a link by which various diaspora can remain in touch around the world.

The Commonwealth is for most of the British public the most visible living legacy of the empire, with its link championed by a monarch who has lived through the decolonisation process. A living body, not a colonial relic, the Commonwealth is a successful story which looks set to strengthen in the future. It has 5 of the world's economically fastest growing countries

(including India) as members and the connections arising from the legacy of British rule mean trading costs 15% less than elsewhere in the world.

[xxiii]The Commonwealth has developed into a consensual, informal and adaptable organisation that could be uniquely useful. Such a view cannot help strengthen the body's reputation in the British public's perception. As the number of Britons with recollections of colonialism are relatively few, such a modern image could well colour perceptions of empire and make its legacy appear benign.

The passage of time might have started to heal some of the rawness that underpinned the harsher views of empire that were prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century during the decolonisation process. The link between many of the liberation movements in the old colonies and Marxism was strong. The subsequent defeat of communism in west and the strengthening of liberal explanations of the benefits of market capitalism and democracy has also helped to soften the often black and white terms in which empires were viewed during decolonisation. But it is the case too that the political left might be leaving its traditionally hostile view of the colonial legacy behind. Clare Short as the Minister for International Development wrote to her Zimbabwean opposite number in 1998, "(we are as a government) without links to our colonial interests".[xxiv]

An example of overall softening of the retrospective views of empire was set out by Michael Palin in an interview when he became the new President of the Royal Geographical Society.[xxv]Believing that it might now be the time for Britain to stop fixating on the negative aspects of empire, he said, " if we

say that all of our past involvement with the world was bad and wicked and wrong, I think we are doing ourselves a great disservice. It has set up lines of communication between people that are still very strong. We still have links with other countries – culturally, politically and socially – that perhaps we shouldn't forget". Commenting on the interview the historian, Andrew Roberts,[xxvi]said, " alleluia! Mr Palin is quite right to acknowledge that the British Empire has been taught in particularly abject way in recent years".

But before we all get somewhat carried away, some sense of proportion is important. Historians do consider themselves the purveyors of what might be the inconvenience of truth. Though even they are sometimes forced to criticise the over enthusiasm of their profession. My point is ably demonstrated by David Anderson in a review of the work of the American historian Caroline Elkins.[xxvii]She had assessed the number of Africans killed by the British in the Mau Mau rebellion as 300, 000. The figure had provoked considerable criticism including from Anderson who had personally researched the field. Noting the affect of such exaggeration was to give succour to defenders of the legacy of empire, he was quick to make the counter point. While the British were no more atrocious as imperialists than anyone else, they were no better. " It is time we set aside British amnesia and squared up to the realities of our empire", he wrote.

In British politics there has been for most of the 20th century amongst the left a perceived connection between colonialism and capitalism. The expectation was the demise of empire would facilitate the building of a socialist society. But even where over time the economic arguments against

colonialism splintered or faded the principles of the right to national determination and a generalised internationalism survived.[xxviii] Movements such as that for Colonial Freedom, launched in 1954, had at heart a deeply held view that colonialism was an evil for British society as well as for the colonised because it was morally corrupting to the identity of the British self.

If it is the development of broader political thinking in society that helps set the context for the acceptability or otherwise of fresh historical analysis, then there has been some perceptible recent shifts. A speech by Gordon Brown on 'Britishness' in 2004 drew both on leading historians of the British national story and cast a net into more right wing territory too. The reasoning was that it was politically disastrous for centre left parties to abandon the ground of national identity and patriotism.[xxix] As Brown reflected on the historical aspects of being British, there was a "Whigish air to his account".

Any sense that the political aspect of decolonisation is the pervading approach amongst historians has long started to ebb. Whilst the initial veer away from an Anglo-centric perspective on the break-up of empire still maintained some elements of a political theme, the focus has moved to the study of individual countries' achievement of self-determination.[xxx] There is still a considerable way to go in the historiography of empire, for instance in terms of the study of women's history.

Coincident with the increasing profile of Fergusson in the mid-noughties, a number of historians have delivered groundbreaking research into the

legacy of empire along these new lines. Anderson's research on the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s was one such case. Undermining the received wisdom of an orderly retreat and deals done at conferences is that empires are not glorious being concerned with the power relations, the domination, often de-humanisation, of one race by another. For Anderson the British empire was no different.[xxxii] His research has been more focused, not the coffee table book tableau view, but dealing with specific events or countries shining a light upward into how we might view the empire enterprise as a whole. The irony here though is not that Fergusson's work is viewed as novel or controversial: rather it is the thesis that must be challenged, rather than challenge.

However, Stephen Howe's claim that Anderson's work will transform our understanding of how the British Empire ended and force a wide re-evaluation of Britain's modern history is pushing the point.[xxxiii] The issue remains that a considerable body of the new work that is aimed at the wider readership is still Anglo-centric. The charge here is that Fergusson is not a heavyweight historian, with his works relying too heavily on secondary texts. As the reassessment of empire progresses with old mythologies being re-evaluated as opposed to rehashed there is a danger that work like Anderson's are not permeating effectively enough into the popular histories[xxxiiii]. Tapan Raychaudhuri in considering the legacy of empire from the Indian perspective argues that few serious historians in India see much that was good in Britain's imperial record. However, there is little

evidence to suggest that in terms of empire's legacy with the British public that such a view has entered the general consciousness.

The impact on Britain of the loss of an empire is different from that on the former colonial states who composed it. It can be hypothesised that the recent British experience was one of becoming a new nation born from a loss of identity (empire) rather than through the more normal moment of achievement of self-determination and sovereignty. The British – and maybe it's currently subordinate identities – have only begun to value their status as a nation as they have lost it as an empire. Looking to the future, rather than embraced tradition, the past is a foreign country.[xxxiv] However, this thesis rather misses the point. The relationship to football that Robinson uses is not strong enough. Past results, whether triumphant or ignominious, are sustained in the pantheon of the football club's history together with the folklore that accompanies them. It is no guide to future performance on the pitch but it is not dumped, as history becomes part of the living entity that is the club. Extrapolating to Britain, the same is true: history has not been forgotten but assimilated.

The notion of popular imperialism is not a new one. Indeed the Falklands war in 1982 could be argued to be the last visible outpouring of such sentiment, though the peaceful return of Hong Kong is another somewhat less jingoist example. It should not be a surprise that a positive idea of the empire's legacy or receptiveness (even amongst the cynicism of the Channel 4 commissioning editors) to the work of authors such as Fergusson does exist. The success of imperialism as a popular cultural phenomena during the 20th

century was set out by MacKenzie.[xxxv]The empire's popularity was a core ideology in Britain which later morphed into nostalgia.

However, given natural human emotions, it would be hardly surprising that the visible and quick end of empire after 1945 would not evoke such sentiment. Equally the extent though that nostalgia was a means of escaping the harsh realities of the day is of course a moot point. Though as the Economist noted,[xxxvi]having taken the loss of empire relatively lightly, the British public's concept of identity had been fortified by a comforting set of images of national heroism derived from the Second World War. But nostalgia can be both melancholic as well as euphoric. In the late 1970s the economic and political challenges in Britain were different from today and discussion was focused on how their malaise coupled with the loss of an empire could be met.[xxxvii]Events like Suez summed up the sense of decline associated with decolonisation, but in the public consciousness, victory in the South Atlantic in 1982 has to some extent become linked with economic reform and major social readjustment.

Today notions of nostalgia continue to be reinforced by newspaper articles, [xxxviii]for instance those covering the current troubles in Yemen. In an article headed, " We regret driving out the British", ex-Marxist revolutionaries spoke nostalgically of imperial masters they had fought to remove. Whilst patently British rule is not going to return to Yemen, the continued theme of such articles together with similar ones that most of us have read with regard to the Indian sub-continent reinforce a narrative that



underpins the articulation of the some of the putative benefits of imperial rule; albeit driven more by nostalgia than rigorous analysis.

Whilst the revival of the neo-Whig view of empire is associated with Fergusson it is possible to see the earlier emergence of the same train of thought. Max Beloff noted that for younger historians coming of age when he was writing in 1995, an optimistic view of empire was not difficult to find, where the sins of empire had been redeemed by a legacy of democratic institutions and liberal ideas, notably represented by the Commonwealth. [xxxix]He continued, “ the history of the British Empire could be studied to see how this glorious consummation had been achieved”. I would not be so bold as to argue that this was an executive instruction to Fergusson, but my point is that the structure of the argument was already there, albeit in an embryonic way. However, when Clements at a similar time made his plea for more analysis of the economics of empire as a means to aiding its public reassessment, he probably did not have the direction that Fergusson subsequently took in mind.[xl]Its conclusions were probably 180 degrees out from what he had anticipated.

We have all engaged around the dining room table or at the pub in those rather spurious conversations along the lines of “ what if we hadn’t won the first world war”. Such counter factual analyses of history are popular but their value debateable. But it is unsurprising in the sense of the determination to provoke that Fergusson edited a book of counterfactual essays. Such work as Fergusson himself points out challenges conventional

approaches to the study of history. E H Carr dismissed counterfactual history as a mere parlour game and red herring, while E