

Si Monumentum Requiris, Circumspice

The British Empire created today's world, whether we like it or not.

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Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power

Niall Ferguson

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The word “empire,” like most political words, comes with a lot of baggage. For many in this exquisitely egalitarian age, an empire is necessarily a bad thing. An empire implies conquest, power and domination, and these historically omnipresent concepts are deeply repugnant to current sensibilities. To say good things about an empire, and especially a western empire, is therefore to be something of an iconoclast. Niall Ferguson is an iconoclast: he has written an eloquent, often witty and well-balanced defence of the British Empire, and an equally compelling appeal for continued interest in that empire, especially on the part of Americans. I would extend his argument to Canadians.

Today, many Canadians construct their identities against the British Empire: our national narrative is told as a story of the gradual and largely peaceful attainment of independence from the oppressive, or at least restricting, structures of that empire. It is a story that is true as far as it goes, but it can tend to obscure the experiences of past peoples whose ideas are now forgotten, when not reviled. Many past Canadian based their identity on their connections to the British Empire. In 1914, Canadians of all ethnic groups, but especially recent immigrants from what was often called “the mother country,” responded with a full-throated imperial patriotism to Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s emphatic “Canada’s answer goes out to the Empire: Ready, Aye, Ready!” The realities of two world wars ended that kind of imperialism for ever, both here and in Britain, as Ferguson makes clear. We are not as unique as we imagine.

Ferguson asks whether the British Empire did not in the end do good, not only in defeating fascism, but also in spreading around the world the benefits of British culture, among which he numbers the English language, the English constitution, the market system and its associated free

market ideology, the various Protestant religions, and the technologies of communication and transport that sustained the Empire. Obviously many of these things, from technology to Protestantism to the English constitution, are less widely admired than they once were, and markets in particular are intensely controversial. But Ferguson makes it clear that he regards these practices and their global spread as good things. He also regards the Americans as the natural inheritors of the globalized world created and defended by the British Empire.

In today’s world, and especially in the academy, these are regarded as deeply and even repugnantly conservative positions. But although we Canadians often now regard ourselves as having been a marginal and even oppressed people within the Empire, many of the ancestors of English Canadians regarded themselves as full citizens of a global empire: they rebelled in 1837 when they thought that they were not being treated as full citizens. “*Civis Romanus sum*” (I am a Roman citizen) was the grand declaration of Lord Palmerston, and it is a consciousness still reflected in the map of Ontario, where one drives through numerous towns named after Victorian statesmen and imperial soldiers now known only to historians. English Canadians in the past knew that they were on the far-flung edges of the Empire—Ferguson begins with the experiences of his Scottish ancestors in Saskatchewan at the turn of the last century—but they did not think themselves any lower in status than a Londoner. And it is difficult to argue that Canadian settlers were economically exploited: they had significantly higher incomes than average Britons, and (as various Britons were wont to complain) paid no taxes to the metropole to support the navy that defended the entire imperial system. That is one of the past realities overlaid, and not quite inadvertently forgotten, by our standard national narrative.

Another central reality—a present reality—also obscured by our story of anti-imperial national difference is the obvious one that we do today live in, and take for granted, a world in which English is the global *lingua franca* of commerce and technology, in which markets are more cosmopolitan than they have ever been, and in which the vocabulary of constitutional “rights” is everywhere. Ferguson has a positive view of those imperial consequences. Radical critics would disagree, pointing to developing world poverty and to numerous other enduring problems. But we citizens of rich, avowedly multicultural Canada, sharing the world’s most pow-

erful culture with the rest of the Anglo-American world, make an unconvincing victim. It is an unfashionable point, but nationalist ideology aside we Canadians can and often do fit painlessly into the metropolitan “imperial” culture of the United States: ask David Frum. Palmerston’s *civis Romanus sum* is, in this sense, still a reality.

One prominent historian has referred to Canada, like the other British settler states including the United States, as “neo-Britains.” The fact that many settlers in Canada and elsewhere in the neo-British world came from elsewhere, and today come from the developing world, should not obscure the fact that the basic cultural patterns—the cultural DNA as it were—of our society, from language to our political, legal and economic institutions, were originally British. Current sensibilities find the idea that one culture is or was more important than another inherently offensive, but there is little point in being offended by the obvious.

Possessed of a rich half-continent and integrally linked to today’s centres of economic and cultural power, those of us who are here in this country today are among the greatest beneficiaries of British imperialism. We should view that empire not from an imagined standpoint on its margins or among its victims, let alone one at its centre—although past experiences in both places are, of course, perfectly valid objects of historical enquiry—but from where we are really are: in its future. That is what Ferguson does.

It is to be hoped that Canadians will read his account notwithstanding that Canada itself does not occupy a central place in his 500-year story: we are more an effect than a cause of empire. It says a great deal about our current hostility not merely to the Empire, but also to our foundational British traditions, that I have felt it necessary to begin this review with an extensive defence of the importance of that heritage. Ferguson gives us a compelling argument for the centrality of the British Empire to global history, and deserves to be read on that score alone.

Ferguson by no means whitewashes the British Empire: there were many who did not benefit, and many of them are in his volume. The expected crimes are not lacking: slavery, the economic basis of much of the Empire in the 17th and 18th centuries, is treated in detail, and the Irish potato famine, not caused but certainly exacerbated by British economic ideas, is here, as are the concentration camps of the Boer War, the 1919 Amritsar massacre, and any number of other sanguinary episodes. But Ferguson points out that it was also the British Empire that ended the

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slave trade, which he sees as the 19th-century equivalent of terrorism. And in the end, concludes Ferguson, the British Empire bankrupted itself in the world wars, fighting what any liberal must admit were far worse empires. Britain “sacrificed her empire to stop the Germans, Japanese and Italians from keeping theirs. Did not that sacrifice alone expunge all the Empire’s other sins?” he asks.

Ferguson, in other words, is deeply concerned with the moral character of the Empire. He begins by contrasting the 1909 verdict of University of Toronto professor George M. Wrong with that of current critics. Wrong defended the enlightened character of British imperial rule, “a rule that has its faults, no doubt, but such, I would make bold to affirm, as no conquering state ever before gave to a dependent people”; it was a verdict whose measured tone Ferguson contrasts with that of the UN’s 2001 Durban conference on racism, which asserted that “colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.” Those sweeping views are hardly unique: Ferguson quotes even the British national broadcaster: “a BBC website (apparently aimed at schoolchildren) offered the following equally incisive overview of imperial history: “The empire came to greatness by killing lots of people less sharply armed than themselves and stealing their countries.” George Wrong’s view of 1909 was rather more nuanced than that of the international chattering classes, led by the UN and its cheerleader the BBC, a century later.

We Canadians have, as usual, blown with the wind. A century ago we were loyal warriors of empire; today we follow the UN, the BBC and any number of academic critics in denouncing the British Empire and all its works. Canadian politicians and diplomats do not (usually) directly propound the most extreme form of these views, which blames western and specifically British and American powers for all the evils of the world, but they do implicitly buy into them and often take pleasure in presenting themselves as more enlightened than the reviled Americans and less historically burdened than the guilty British. Canadian nationalists often repeat these themes. Ferguson offers a valuable and nuanced corrective.

Ferguson’s history puts the economics of empire at the centre. He begins by focusing on the essentially imitative character of the British Empire. The Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch were the first to find imperial wealth; the English followed in their wake. Ferguson began his career as an economic historian—he is known for an epochal history of the Rothschild family—and he places economics at the centre of his story. He argues that the material basis of the early English Empire was plunder of the Spanish. Soon the English—and prior to the *Act of Union* of 1707, it is the English we are talking about—had muscled their way into the slave trade, originally dominated by the Portuguese. Slave-worked sugar plantations in Jamaica were one of the great sources of imperial wealth flowing into England by the end of the 17th century. Ferguson points out that tea, coffee, tobacco, sugar and textiles entered English culture in that century, all from imperial sources, and all driven by London’s fiscal policies. From there, of course, those tastes were exported, largely by emigrants coming to places like Canada. In more senses than one, the

corner Starbucks is an artefact of empire.

Throughout, Ferguson emphasizes that very little the British did was original: they copied their financial methods, including the organization of the East India Company, from the Dutch, and their naval techniques from the Spanish. They hoped to copy the Spanish in finding gold and silver as well, but failed to find any in North America. They even came to Canada not for its own sake but only to follow, and fight, the French. The British did, however, find what ultimately turned out to be a much more resilient and influential form of empire: colonies of emigrant Britons. Ferguson is particularly good on the “white” emigrant colonies, beginning with those that became the United States. He points out that the famous Boston Tea Party of 1773 was not a revolt by consumers against high taxes but



by smugglers against low ones; it was the principle that politicians in Westminster should tax colonists, be it heavily or lightly, without their consent that was offensive to the Americans.

Ferguson’s coverage of the emigrant colonies of what historians have called “the second British Empire”—the one that rose after American independence—is probably the weakest part of the book, at least from a specifically Canadian perspective. The colony of Upper Canada was largely founded by United Empire Loyalists fleeing persecution and revolution south of the border, as Ferguson duly notes. Canada next appears at the time of the 1837 rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada, which led, as high school history taught us, to the famous report of Lord Durham, recommending “responsible government.” Responsible government meant that the colonial government would be responsible to the elected legislature, and not to a London-appointed governor. In effect, it meant local self-government. Colonial self-government had been advocated by Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and James Mill and John Stuart Mill—the intellectual giants of their age—but it took the 1837 rebellions to get it implemented.

A generation later, the various Canadian colonies came together to form the Confederation of 1867. Responsible government and colonial federation appeared from a British point of view to have solved some sticky problems involving external threats from the Americans, on the one hand, and internal disputes between French and English, Catholic and Protestant, Colonial authority and popular opinion, on the other. Encouraged by the successful Canadian example, the British government set about exporting those nostrums to the rest of the emigrant-populated, or partially emigrant-populated, Empire. The results were successful in Australia and New Zealand; in the latter country, the policy of complete internal self-government can be given some credit for bringing the wars with the indigenous Maori people to an end. But in South Africa, which, of course, had a large African population, the grant of self-government to the white population of a federation of colonies was a disaster. Ferguson underestimates the influence of the Canadian example on the Empire: it is perhaps the fate of a country that causes few wars to be, if not ignored, then at least underestimated by historians.

There are in this otherwise brilliant book some minor errors: the Royal Navy bombarded Alexandria on the 11th of July 1882, not the 31st; the Fashoda crisis was in 1898, not 1899; and Cecil Rhodes’s British South Africa Company Police did not first employ the Maxim gun in battle against the Matabele in 1893, that weapon having been earlier put to promiscuous use by Lord Lugard in Buganda, as Ferguson elsewhere notes. But I am being pedantic.

Empire has once again become newsworthy. Serious voices like Ferguson argue directly for it; left-wing critics denounce “imperialism” as a self-interested grab for resources and economic advantage. In the 18th and 19th centuries, British imperialists argued *for* empire on the grounds that it was good for the English economy. The argument that it was only good for certain influential capitalists was first formulated by the English radical J.A. Hobson in 1902, who wrote to explain the British war for the gold-rich Witwatersrand of South Africa. It was a critique popularized by Lenin, and of course echoed by the left today, attacking the supposed “war for oil” in Iraq. The term “imperialism” is now used by some critics not merely to name the conquest of others, but any policy advantageous to a capitalist power: we inherit even our anti-imperialism from the British Empire.

It is unfortunate that this imaginative and learned volume is largely written off as coffee-table material. Ferguson’s synthetic interpretation of the British Empire is the best one out there; it would be a sound basis for an introductory course on British imperial history. It would nevertheless be good to see it expanded, ramified and duly afflicted with footnotes, so as to transform it into an academically respectable work whose arguments could not be ignored or dismissed. As Ferguson convincingly shows, the British Empire made this world—this world that argues in English about free trade and constitutional rights, not to mention about something called “imperialism.” To adapt the epitaph of Sir Christopher Wren, architect of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, if you seek its monument, look around you. This is the best available single-volume interpretation of that reality. ☐