

## Reviews

JOHN DARWIN, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain*. London: Penguin Books, 2013. XIV, 478 pages, £9.99. ISBN 978-1-846-14089-1 (Originally published by Allen Lane, 2012)

The British Empire often seems to have been a byword for slavery, drug-trafficking, genocide, massacre, economic exploitation, theft of land from indigenous peoples, racism, and many other evils. It is sometimes rather more difficult to call to mind what the benefits, if any, of the Pax Britannica might have been.

This empire owed its existence to a brief conjuncture in world history. Perfect conditions for imperial expansion were provided by industrialisation (represented by the steam engine) and global naval supremacy (confirmed at Trafalgar), combined with a favourable European balance of power, temporary Asian weakness, and disarray in the Islamic world. When these circumstances disappeared, particularly following the United Kingdom's 'great strategic disaster' of 1939–42, the 'essential preconditions for British power vanished for ever'. The vast colonial structure collapsed during little more than twenty years following the end of the Second World War (pp. xi–xii, 401–2).

The author of this book is Dr John Darwin (b 1948), Fellow of the British Academy, and a Fellow of Nuffield College, University of Oxford. His many previous publications include *Britain and Decolonisation* (1988) and *The Empire Project* (2009). The seminal *Unfinished Empire* is based almost exclusively on secondary sources; at any rate, the forty-two pages of endnotes (pp. 403–44) contain comparatively few references to original documentation. What readers are offered, instead, is a tremendous work of synthesis, based on immense erudition and penetrating analysis. The style is lucid, eschews jargon, and is a corresponding joy to read. There is also a critical bibliographical essay, and the index is excellent.

The British Empire was 'unfinished' because it was 'always an empire in the making, indeed an empire scarcely half-made' (p. xii). The late Victorian imperium, far from being 'a durable edifice that needed only periodic attention', was characterised by some observers as actually 'little more than a building site' with 'a set of hopelessly defective plans'. The structure lacked a single coherent vision; and effective command and control from the centre was lacking. An empire might well have been ruled from London for five hundred years (including the British Empire's mediaeval antecedents), but it suffered from a principal-agent problem because headquarters could not always rely on its orders being faithfully implemented by the people on the spot.

It might be added that the empire is also 'unfinished' because it has repercussions in the United Kingdom itself to this day. Secondly, the battle amongst writers about the correct interpretation of the history of the colonial era rages unabated. Thirdly, it is probably true, even today, that the 'sun never sets' on the remnants of the empire, which still stretches from Gibraltar to Pitcairn via the British Indian Ocean Territory, and from Bermuda to the Falkland Islands.

John Darwin adopts what might be characterised as a post-postimperialist approach, leaving behind the squabbles of imperialist apologists and their nationalist detractors. Darwin seeks instead to understand the empire in calm, scholarly, and non-polemical fashion, although this should not be taken to imply the absence of lapidary judgements. He is strong on all aspects of the empire and its regions, nor is the 'informal empire' (Argentina, Egypt, treaty-port China) overlooked.

A thematic format is preferred. Indeed, all of the twelve chapters could stand as separate essays in their own right whilst, in the present book, they nudge the story forwards. A wide range of subject matter is discussed: 'ideas of empire', trade, culture, identity, decolonisation, and much more besides. Amongst specific highlights might be mentioned the discussion of Viscount Wolseley (pp. 136–47), the Great Indian Rebellion of 1857 (pp. 246–58), an incisive critique of Professor Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (pp. 266–8), and the catastrophic humiliation of Macmillan's premiership (pp. 363–6).

For the general public 'the empire' meant the settler colonies, particularly Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa (p. 89). Nineteen million Britons emigrated between 1815 and 1930, mostly to the United States (p. 90), but many others to the dominions, where they hoped to create 'new and better Britains' (pp. 392, 398). But in reality, India was the lynchpin (pp. 89, 187–8). Darwin goes so far as to say that in Asia it would be more accurate to talk not of a 'British Empire' but of an 'Anglo-Indian' one (p. 343). The United Kingdom without India (from 1947) was no longer an Asian great power. The grand illusion that the United Kingdom was playing a world role crashed to earth on 16 January 1968, when Harold Wilson announced a British withdrawal from East of Suez by 1971. The 'largest empire the world had ever known' had gone (apart from a few relics), never to re-appear.

In *Unfinished Empire* a virtuoso intellectual display enables the author to reduce a vast canvas into a coherent whole, covering four hundred pages of main text. Most of all, John Darwin's clear strategic vision provides an overarching framework within which individual territories and historical episodes can be safely placed. This book is little short of a masterpiece.

Anthony V.M. Horton