

What price an American Empire?

Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire by Niall Ferguson, Penguin Press, 2004, ISBN 0-713-99615-3

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8 December 2004

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This is the second of a three-part review

The history of organised hypocrisy

Niall Ferguson's ideal hegemon is the British Empire, in comparison with which, as he repeatedly points out, the United States fares badly.

America has not been able to take up the British imperial mantle because Americans, in Ferguson's view, just do not have what it takes to rule an empire. "The products of America's elite education institutions seem especially reluctant to go overseas," he writes, and prefer film studies to Near Eastern languages. They do not have the sort of imperial spirit that the British educational system put into its alumni. There is no one in America to compare with T. E. Lawrence or the heroes of John Buchan novels who could "pass for a Moroccan in Mecca or a Pathan in Peshawar."

The young American elite, we must suppose, have just not experienced enough cold showers, flogging and buggery to make the grade as empire builders.

When General Maude took control of Iraq, or Mesopotamia as it then was, in 1917 he made a speech promising that the British had not come as conquerors but as liberators. Ferguson compares it to Bush's speech to the Iraqi people in 2003 that expressed almost exactly the same sentiments. The difference, according to Ferguson, is that whatever they said, the British "intention was to stay in control of Iraq for the foreseeable future."

Ferguson admires the way in which Britain retained its power in Iraq behind the façade of supposedly independent governments until 1958. "In short," he writes, "there were British government representatives, military and civilian, in Baghdad uninterruptedly for almost exactly forty years. When the British went into Iraq, they stayed. Will there be Americans playing such a role in Baghdad in 2043? It seems, to put it mildly, improbable."

He has to admit that Iraq was not the most successful example of British imperialism. It was, he says, a late addition to the empire and run on a shoestring. A better example, in his opinion, is Egypt. The Bush administration could learn a lot, he suggests, from the British occupation of Egypt, which always functioned behind Egyptian puppets: "There is a great deal to be said for promising to leave—provided you do not actually mean it or do it."

For Ferguson, empire is about "organised hypocrisy" and Egypt, which the British ruled from 1882, can usefully serve as a lesson for the US in Iraq. He compares the swift British military victory over Egyptian nationalist forces to that of the US in Iraq. Like the US,

Britain had economic interests in Egypt—in the form of the Suez Canal. Like the Americans they repeatedly promised to leave. In 1922 they went so far as to declare Egypt independent. But they did not leave. By 1954 there were 80,000 British troops in the Canal Zone. Ferguson considers this to be entirely justified. "This is known as hypocrisy," he writes, "and it is something to which liberal empires must sometimes resort."

Far from being critical of British conduct in Egypt, he regards the British occupation as beneficial to the Egyptians because it guaranteed that there would be no default on foreign loans. As a result there was substantial investment in Egypt's infrastructure. Yet, as even Ferguson has to admit, infant mortality actually rose between 1917 and 1934. He justifies the British occupation to his own satisfaction by arguing, "Egypt may not have experienced a *Wirtschaftswunder* [economic miracle] under British rule. But nor did it experience an economic disaster, which the fiscal irresponsibility of successive Egyptian rulers might well have caused."

The image of the British Empire that Ferguson presents in *Colossus* will be familiar to readers of his previous book *Empire: How Britain made the Modern World*, in which he characterised the British Empire as a beneficial form of globalisation that only failed because Britain took up arms against what he believes were the far more oppressive empires of Germany and Japan. He does not deny that there were atrocities committed in the British Empire, but excuses them by arguing that those committed by everyone else were much worse.

The British Empire, according to Ferguson, brought the benefits of the English language, English forms of land tenure, Scottish and English banking, the Common Law, Protestantism, team games, the limited or "night watchman" state, representative assemblies and the idea of liberty. To be in the British Empire was to have "the good housekeeping seal of approval" and to be able to borrow at lower rates on the London financial markets. So great were the benefits of being in the British Empire, if we are to believe Ferguson, that it is difficult to see why those so unfortunate as to be left outside it were not queuing up to join.

According to Ferguson, "the ones who revolted against British rule were the best off of all Britain's colonial subjects."

It was the prosperous inhabitants of New England who had bigger farms, paid less tax and were better educated than the inhabitants of old England, not the "indentured labourers of Virginia or the slaves of Jamaica, who first threw off the yoke of imperial authority."

He rejects the idea that the fall of the British Empire was "a victory for freedom fighters who took up arms from Dublin to Delhi to rid

their peoples of the yoke of colonial rule” as misleading. He claims that, “Throughout the twentieth century, the principal threats—and the most plausible alternatives—to British rule were not national independence movements, but other empires.”

All of these empires were significantly harsher than British rule. “It was,” he argues, “the staggering cost of fighting these imperial rivals that ultimately ruined the British Empire. In other words, the Empire was dismantled not because it had oppressed subject peoples for centuries, but because it took up arms for just a few years against far more oppressive empires. It did the right thing, he says, regardless of the cost.

There is some truth in the idea that the British Empire was fatally weakened by its imperial rivals in the First World War, but the conception of the British war effort as a selfless crusade has not been heard for many years. It was not possible to rehabilitate what the poet Wilfred Owen called the old lie *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* [it is fitting and sweet to die for your country] until most of the men and women who experienced that war at first hand were safely underground and the revolution the First World War gave rise to could be thought to be just as safely consigned to history.

Since the liquidation of the Soviet Union—and with it the restraint placed on the imperialist ambitions of the US and other major powers—historians have increasingly attempted to “recover the views of the war that prevailed before it fell into the hands of the writers and novelists of the late 1920s.” These are Hew Strachan’s words in *The First World War: A New Illustrated History* (Simon and Schuster, 2003). But his revisionism is typical of Ferguson’s generation of British conservative historians. Owen, it should be said, died in 1918 during the last week of the war. His poems are first hand contemporary accounts and would be classed by any historian as a primary source, quite apart from their considerable literary merit.

The Biggles books of W. E. Johns who created Bulldog Drummond or H. C McNeile, known as “Sapper”, are Strachan’s preferred literary expression of the First World War. These boys’ adventure books preserved a myth of militarism that died in reality on the barbed wire of no man’s land. If Strachan was alone in this preference it might be thought to be a personal peculiarity but Ferguson also praises patriotic literature and adventure stories. In his *Pity of War* (Penguin Press, 1998) he is scornful of poets who criticised the First World War. Instead he gives prominence to the Italian Futurists and Vorticists who, he argues, “relished the aesthetics of total war.”

His view of the war could be characterised in the same way. A section in the *Pity of War* on the question of prisoner massacres—that might in another book have been a serious discussion of the authenticity of accounts of massacres, comparison of the practices of the different armies and regiments, and an examination of the contexts in which specific massacres took place, etc.,—becomes a voyeuristic tour of scenes of human brutality and degradation. Ferguson does not set out to chronicle or explain the atrocities, but glories in them. He uses emotive, non-rational rhetorical methods to create an impression—that war is good and death, whether inflicted, observed or experienced, exhilarating. The First World War, we are told, was fun, a thrill, and “a great lark”. The reason why men continued to fight was, he suggests, “because they wanted to.”

“In the final analysis,” Ferguson writes, “this may be the best explanation of all for the continuation of the conflict: Oh What a Lovely War, literally.”

Ferguson uses letters, diaries and memoirs to construct a view of the First World War in which men and women were fascinated by death,

sex and violence. Of course the documents that express those views have always been there. The question is what emphasis the rational and objective historian places upon them. Ferguson chooses to emphasise these psychologically aberrant views and manufacture out of the psychopathology of human beings at war a scene of Nietzschean ecstasy induced by some sort of primeval death instinct.

A profoundly disturbing image emerges, not so much of the First World War, the psychological effects of which have been well documented and studied in subsequent conflicts, but of the state of modern history.

For most of the twentieth century, even right-wing historians have had to adapt themselves to the political and ideological consequences of the Russian Revolution—how the world’s first successful socialist revolution inspired millions in a belief that there was an alternative to imperialist brutality, a belief that survived even after the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalin. It was de rigeur to deplore the slaughter of the First World War, but now there is a generation of historians who are increasingly eager to revise the judgement of earlier researchers. They can do so without doing obvious violence to evidence and principles of historical methodology. At a cursory glance all the apparatus of a history book is present in *The Pity of War*. There are extracts from contemporary accounts by statesmen, generals and ordinary soldiers from all sides; there are statistics, economic, military and sociological; there are contemporary photographs showing scenes of carnage and men relaxing behind the lines. There are, of course, extensive footnotes. The immediate impression is of a book at once scholarly yet sensitive. On closer inspection, however, a very different book emerges. It is a carefully camouflaged glorification of war.

When in *Colossus* Ferguson praises the organised hypocrisy by which imperial governments function he is not merely noting it, he is advocating it as a principle of policy. Any historian might describe the role of organised hypocrisy in the course of historical events and analyse its social, political and economic origins, its causes and effects. Ever since Ranke, who was the first to use the records of the chancelleries of Europe which were just then beginning to become available, historians have tried to get back to original sources. They want to read the policy documents, the minutes of meetings and the secret memoranda not just the public speeches, press statements and the self-justificatory memoirs. Their professional vocation has always been to uncover the organised hypocrisy that governments practice, not to advocate it. In doing so Ferguson places a large question mark over his own work. When the historian thinks hypocrisy is justified how can his work be trusted? Books written on this basis have ceased to be works of history and have become pure ideology.

To be continued



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