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The anti-historian

by [David Pryce-Jones](#)

On *The Decline & Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997* by Piers Brendon.

Piers Brendon

The Decline & Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997.

Knopf, 816 pages, \$37.50

The Decline and Fall of the British Empire is a title suggesting that its author, Piers Brendon, sees himself a worthy successor to Edward Gibbon. And indeed Gibbon is often invoked in these pages as though he were a guiding spirit. A man of the Enlightenment, Gibbon attributed right and wrong in accord with the preconceptions of his day. But he had the imagination, the empathy, to appreciate that people in the past had other beliefs and standards and so did things differently. For the historian, description is one element in coming to terms with the past, and passing judgment is another, and the ability to keep them distinct is what makes Gibbon great.

Piers Brendon is instead an anti-historian, that is to say one who describes the past not in order to capture how it really was but only for the sake of passing moral judgments about it. For him, the past is to be judged solely in the light of the present, as though the outlook in today's moral and intellectual arena is not just the product of the times but rather some sort of final word. The anachronism is deliberate, for the whole purpose of this book is to give substance to the single, very simple, and eminently fashionable preconception that the British Empire was always and everywhere a criminal enterprise. Those who ran it were scoundrels, profiteers, or boobies, whose talk about spreading civilization was nothing but hypocritical cover for murdering innocent natives, for racism and spoliation. "Lust for loot," in Brendon's phrase, was the real and abiding motivation of all such.

Sketching pen-portraits of the Empire's proconsuls, governors, and soldiers, Brendon maintains a steady level of scorn for their activities, rising to mockery for their persons, sometimes in singular details concerning their domestic lives and tastes, the shape of their moustaches, and even their foreskins. However much these men may have been praised in the past for their contribution to the nation, not one earns Brendon's unqualified approval or escapes his sneering. Clive of India suffered from "nervous attacks" but still "garnered several hundred thousand pounds." Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, was "a man of majestic littleness." Governor-General of Canada, Lord Durham advocated reform "while treating all humanity as his inferior." Lord Palmerston, one of the most successful of Foreign Secretaries, was "incurably frivolous." Ahead of the Blackshirts by almost a century, Thomas Carlyle was nevertheless "anticipating the language of fascism." Prime Minister Salisbury was "A thick-skinned, short-sighted, cross-grained reactionary, known as the 'Buffalo.'" (Even minor personalities have their nicknames slung round their necks—thus Sir Bartle Frere is

“Sir Bottle Beer,” Walter Monckton is “the Oilcan,” Sir Hugh Foot is “Pussyfoot” as though the cut and thrust of long-ago politics furnished lasting judgments of character.) Viceroy Lytton was “a minor poet and a major popinjay.” Viceroy Curzon was said “to have the habits of minor royalty without its habitual incapacity.” And so on and on and on.

Those who stood in the way of the Empire are in contrast admirable, no matter how many lives were lost as a result of their opposition. Tipu Sultan (the “Tiger of Mysore” who was killed by the British in India in 1799) was “intelligent, cultured and witty.” The Maoris were “formidable warriors,” as well as “adept at commerce.” Zaghul Pasha, organizer of the first nationalist riots in Egypt, was “Ruthless, charming, eloquent, and vain” while the al-Azhar mosque at the center of the agitation he aroused was “radiant” and “revered.” In Iraq, King Faisal, scheming against the British who had set him on his throne, was “slim, bearded, and aquiline,” bearing himself with “regal dignity.” In India, Gandhi’s “god-like moral stature, which transfigured his wispy frame, gave him unique authority.” Although engaging in warfare that set back his country for decades, Gamal Abdul Nasser “behaved like the embodiment of national will.” In Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta “preached patriotism and moral uplift,” and Robert Mugabe was “the Lenin of Africa.” And so on and on, as ever.

The British habitually over-reacted to resistance and protest, according to Brendon, as evidenced for instance by their brutality after the Indian Mutiny, all the more barbarous because the setting was one of picturesque beauty and riches:

The storming of the city ... was a bloodbath. ... A prolonged and ferocious battle followed through the narrow streets, walled gardens, white mansions, domed mosques and cypress groves. The British advance faltered as soldiers got drunk on pillaged alcohol... . The carnage shocked even a hardened young subaltern like Frederick Roberts... . Lieutenant William Hodson compounded the horror by murdering three of Bahadur Shah’s sons, who had surrendered with their father... . The city was sacked with the same ruthlessness and a vast amount of hidden treasure was unearthed. As usual, Queen Victoria (who deplored the unchristian spirit of vengeance) acquired some prize articles.

In the equally beautiful and placid Ceylon, no less typically, the brutal British

overthrew the ancient Kandyan kingdom. They exiled its monarch to the subcontinent, looting his throne, sceptre, sword, footstool and other royal regalia. They turned his Audience Hall first into a church and later into a court. They imposed their own system of rule. They suppressed resistance ferociously, provoking a national abhorrence for the conquerors.

Or again, General Sir Gerald Templer was “dynamic and dogmatic ... also surprisingly lucid” as he set about using “Dyak head-hunters and Fijians descended from cannibals” to build “a police state” with “totalitarian restrictions” for the purpose of suppressing Communism in Malaya. Following this example, another general responded to the Mau Mau in Kenya by masterminding “a regime of searches, curfews, contagions, restrictions, shortages and forced labour,” which on one page prompts Brendon to evoke the Soviet gulag and on the next page Auschwitz. And so on, and still on, until the Empire met the wretched end it deserved.

Imperialism is a complex phenomenon, one bearing on the entire human race throughout recorded history. Two parties are involved, necessarily one stronger and the other weaker. Over the centuries the countries of Europe had become too equal for imperialism among themselves, territorial disputes notwithstanding. Among the causes of British strength were trade, exploration, Protestantism, and the industrial revolution, but these could never have amounted to empire-building without the weakness of others. Muslim and Hindu rivalry in India, despotism in Asia, and tribalism in Africa

ensured that whole areas of the globe were stagnant, incapable either of progress or defense, but exposed to outsiders with the vitality to conquer and colonize them. If history has a law, it appears to be that the strong will always dominate the weak until such time as the weak learn how to become strong themselves. As it happens, countries that were never within a European empire—Afghanistan, Yemen, Ethiopia—have experienced the greatest difficulties in overcoming poverty and backwardness.

In common with every empire, including those in the Asia and Africa of earlier centuries, the British certainly waged some destructive wars, and were capable of the stupid or self-serving acts that so excite Brendon, and especially in the treatment of Ireland. What he leaves out altogether is the other side of the picture. The British suppressed slavery and piracy and a good deal of tribal and customary barbarity as well. Hitherto unknown in those parts of the world, political processes began through the formation of parties and movements and elections. Legislative and executive councils were first steps in representative government. Judges, civil servants, and District Commissioners by the thousand were responsible for civil and legal administration free from bribery and corruption. The phrase “law and order” at last crops up some 500 pages into the book, but Pax Britannica was a reality, the achievement of the men Brendon so easily jeers at.

Brendon either ignores public works, or deprecates them. For instance, he believes that the railways were laid in India not for the general benefit but in order to transport artillery, and that telegraph lines were only a means of control. But besides railways and communications, the British built harbors and ports, hospitals, schools, technical colleges, and universities. Veterinary science was a novelty. Hundreds of printing presses spread free speech, also a novelty. Why is there no mention of those who devoted their careers to improving what they found abroad, men like Greene Pasha who eliminated cholera in Egypt or Willcocks Pasha who built the Nile dams? Sir William Jones was one of the greatest Orientalists of all time, the founder of Sanskrit scholarship, enrolling Indians in his studies through the Asiatic Society of Bengal—Brendon confines discussion of him and his work to a slanderous aside purporting to show racism towards Indians. James Prinsep drained malarial swamps, and also researched the origins of Buddhism. Unrecorded by Brendon, there were thousands of such benefactors, men of the quality of Henry Thomas Colebrooke, A. H. Layard, or Henry Rawlinson. Taken together, they were responsible for recovering in one country after another identities and cultures that had disintegrated and almost disappeared, and as a result people all over the empire became aware of their past and could take pride in it.

In the end, recovery of identity and culture was bound to finish as nationalism. People proud of their past would no longer tolerate foreign rule; the British had always known that their presence could not be extended indefinitely. Nationalism was the agent that mobilized the weak, and converted them into the strong. In addition, the two world wars had shrunk the moral and the military standing of the British. Ambitious nationalists saw their chance to take power. Well over twenty independent countries emerged, and the record is mixed, sometimes tragic, because a majority of them came under one-man rulers or military regimes. Resentment and anger, if that existed, has long since been generally tempered with regret for lost stability.

Someone who analyzed the process of imperial withdrawal as though speaking on behalf of the voiceless masses was Elie Kedourie. Born and growing up in Baghdad, he had taken for granted the protection afforded by the British. Once the British had left, however, Iraqi officers soon seized power, and Kedourie was forced into exile to save himself. Responsibility for this lay primarily with the Iraqi regime, but indirectly with the British who had not prepared a better alternative. Whether out of guilt or some sense of abasement and defeat, British intellectuals have proved unwilling to criticize any aspect of the new Third World, instead almost uniformly blaming Britain for whatever miseries nationalist rulers were inflicting on those within their reach. The historian Arnold Toynbee, then widely considered a sage, was an outstanding representative of the type. This is how Kedourie

described Toynbee's contribution to the formation of public opinion:

Listening to the far-fetched analogies, the obscure references, the succession of latinate, polysyllabic words, and one involved period following another, we begin to discern the shrill and clamant voice of English radicalism, thrilling with self-accusatory and joyful lamentation. *Nostra culpa, nostra maxima culpa*: we have invaded, we have conquered, we have dominated, we have exploited.

Brendon writes more straightforwardly than Toynbee, but he plays comparable linguistic tricks. A selection of unfamiliar and unexplained words in his narrative includes *shroffs*, *lorchas*, *joey*, *fumarole*, *huma*, *moshag*, *ackee*, *xebecs*, *cenchona*, *karosses*, *pombe*, *dura*. Furthermore he borrows terms from many of the languages of the empire, with their translation in brackets. What is served by the information that shrimp paste in Burmese is *ngapi*? Or that *kotoko* means porcupine in Ashanti? Or that a flaxen cloak in Maori is *kakahu*? These and dozens more examples can only have been dug up from the literature, and borrowed to intimidate by giving an impression of omniscience on a par with Toynbee's obscure references and latinate polysyllables.

The source of the thrilling and self-accusatory lamentation that both these writers have in common remains a mystery, one that is central to the times. In reality, the virtues and vices of the British Empire have to be compared to those of the Romans, the Mongols, the Arabs, the Spaniards in South America, the Mughals, the Ottoman Empire, the Germans in Africa or the African tribal rulers among themselves, Russia in its tsarist expansion and then its Soviet incarnation, even the French in Annam and Algeria. Britain does not come out worst. The depiction of special and one-dimensional British villainy rests upon suppression of truth as well as suggestion of falsehood. But why the masochism, why this perverse confusion of description and judgment?

One possible answer is that the likes of Toynbee and Brendon are snobs, believing themselves to be morally superior to those they are writing about. They are laying claim to a finer and more up-to-date sensibility that permits them to condemn and ridicule the crude and benighted figures of another age. Another possible answer is that they have staked out a comfort zone. The Empire was certain to dissolve sooner rather than later, and since the loss is within living memory, and still raw, the British should console themselves with the thought that it was not worth having in the first place—as schoolboys like to say, good riddance to bad rubbish. Alternatively, there may be an uncomfortable perception that the strong and the weak of former times have unexpectedly exchanged positions, and it would be as well now to profess a guilty conscience for past strength and apologize to all those with whom the British came into contact in the days of their eminence. And perhaps there is a yet further underlying perception that without the protective periphery of the empire the metropolis itself is now collapsing, and in their turn the British are experiencing the disintegration of their identity and culture, and must accustom themselves to it. This would necessitate a total misrepresentation of their past, indeed the replacement of their history with a complete anti-history, and Brendon is just the right man for that.

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