

## REVIEW

Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 384 pp.

It has been six years since the publication of the paperback edition of Niall Ferguson's *Empire*, but its compelling conclusions, grounded in the story of an empire that controlled at one time roughly one-quarter of the world's lands and its peoples, are no less worthy of consideration than they were in 2004. *Empire* is a historical work of tremendous scope: it considers half a millennium of some of the most momentous events in not only Western, but world history. Its tale is a necessarily a global one, and Mr. Ferguson needs expend little effort in convincing readers of the importance of studying a global power which played an indispensable role in the formation of the modern era. The unique voice with which Ferguson tells this story is difficult to describe. He treats his reader as a newcomer guest at the gala *Empire*, where he, as the knowledgeable and gregarious host, takes the reader by the hand and introduces her to the luminaries, the architects and inhabitants of empire, one-by-one. Indeed, while one expects Ferguson to excel where he discusses the financial history of the British Empire, and he does not disappoint in his traditional forte, he is unexpectedly gifted in tracing the history of Imperial Britain through the individuals who helped build it, define and redefine its purpose and conscience, and ultimately cope with its dismantlement. Ferguson's tale is one not only of GDP growth rates and capital markets, but of the human capital, the individual enterprise that built the most powerful empire of its time, and arguably that the world has ever known.

Wherever possible, Ferguson forces a reconsideration of the popular modern concept of empire: one of pure exploitation, slavery, racism, and cultural extermination. This willingness to reconsider such a sensitive issue could perhaps provoke accusations that he is an apologist for imperialism, but in this, his crowning work on the topic, any such charge is wholly unfounded. Ferguson does not gloss over the negative consequences of Britain's imperial past. He describes in detail "the over-crowding, poor hygiene, lack of exercise, and inadequate diet," of transported slaves, describes as "bogus disciplines" the pseudo-sciences of phrenology and eugenics which sought to establish and legitimize ideas of white racial superiority, and substantively discusses British concentration camps wherein thousands died following the Boer Wars. Instead of lamenting the tragedies of empire and then ceasing analysis, as it would be easy to do, *Empire* acknowledges tragedy, but then explains that the British Empire did so much more than spread suffering. The British Empire as described

in this book was a self-doubting one, where its citizens constantly reevaluated their own role in the suffering of others. It was an empire of conscience, one which recognized its own folly in initiating the slave trade, and then made its cessation a central goal of its foreign policy, one which is notable for the degree to which it spread free market ideals, stable democratic governments, and modern communications and transportation technology, not for its cruelty. Indeed, the willingness with which Britain allowed its imperial holdings to slip away, which *Empire* argues was partially the result of a necessary and conscious sacrifice in order to prevent Nazi domination of Europe, sets Imperial Britain up as a nation willing to sacrifice its own identity for the far greater good.

Especially relevant to today's reader are *Empire's* conclusions about the current state and future of American empire. America, it would appear, is at a crossroads, where the two roads diverged in the wood are one of continuing informal empire and another where America shrugs off its traditional reluctance to rule over other peoples and accepts itself as heir of the British Imperial legacy. Ferguson does not argue in favor of either path, only explaining that both are possible future identities for an America in the midst of an era of self-reflection. Should Columbia at some point rule the land, the sky, or the paths of orbit around the Earth as Britannia once ruled the waves, then it should look to the British Empire for lessons in how to manage its new identity. The sense of enterprise and enthusiasm for spreading its way of life to foreign places that the peoples of Imperial Britain possessed are a central part of the American identity. It would be foolish for America to consider Imperial Britain only as a relic of the past, for if Ferguson is to be believed, what has been could in America's future yet be again.

*Empire's* most contentious argument, in essence that British Empire was not nearly as destructive to the peoples and ways of life in its colonies as its imperial competitors, is perhaps its greatest weakness. Although Ferguson does not use such a term, there is a certain implication that, if there were to be a "good empire," it would be Imperial Britain. Ferguson does not make this point blindly; he relies on a solid grouping of sources to back up his claim. Ultimately, while a reader open to reinterpretation of the British Imperial legacy would very likely be swayed by the argument in *Empire*, one who believes resolutely in the evils of imperialism will likely remain unconvinced. Whether or not one accepts the portrait of the British Empire that Ferguson has created, it is impossible to dismiss *Empire*. It is an informative work, both entertaining and sobering, and well worth reading.

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