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Understanding the British Empire

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Author:
Ronald Hyam
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Here is a history of verve, valour and vignettes with broad and exciting perspectives that make it wonderfully unfashionable and provocatively readable with the constant eminence of its scholarship and style. Historian of empire Ronald Hyam delivers with *Understanding the British Empire* a collection of essays and chapters written during the course of his more than 50-year career as a Cambridge Don at Magdalene College. Though some of the chapters have previously been published, they have now been revised and updated, and by being in this single volume rather than being exiled in a library journal have become more accessible even to those familiar with Hyam?s work (and if you are a student of the British Empire then it would be hard not to). There is also previously unpublished material as well as a long and valuable introduction.

This volume has six sections: i) ?Geopolitics and economics? ii) ?Ethics and religion? iii) ?Bureaucracy and policy-making? iv) ?Great men? (chapters on Smuts and Churchill) v) ?Sexuality? and vi) ?Imperial historians?. These sections show (some of) the range which Dr Hyam has covered during his career and every chapter is full of fascination and interest, determinedly evading modern historical labels or fads. Indeed Hyam exhorts his clear method in the preface with his belief that history ?needs to be freed from the pitfalls of any abstract theorising which is not grounded in a basic understanding of the way the world works, human beings behave, and governments think. So let us immerse ourselves in the study of tendencies

of human nature, the operation of governments, the motives of rulers, the predicaments of the governed, the reasoning of the politicians, and the techniques of the bureaucrats. Let us contemplate the diversity of the interests and the complexities of policies, as well as the mechanisms of change, the circuits of continuity, the wiring of interaction and response. Let us register the significance of what people thought *at the time*; and let us relish the explanatory power of taking broad and protean perspectives? (p. xiv). This refreshingly simple cogent approach enables Hyam to cover all the subjects of empire with clarity and purpose.

Hyam?s approach allows him to unite and give coherence to chapters with seemingly variant titles like ?Africa and the Labour Government, 1945-1951? and ?Penis envy and ?penile othering? in the colonies and America?. The great strength of the book is Hyam?s ability to explain contentious and detailed issues and concepts using astute analysis and often telling anecdote. This also works when he demonstrates the importance of small ignored issues upon the fortunes of the British Empire, such as the battles between the Colonial Office, the Treasury and Foreign Office over the post-war empire, particularly involving administratively ambiguous dependencies and protectorates (pp. 217?22). This appraisal allows the reader to see the views of different ministers, such as ?neo-Palmerstonian? Bevin at Foreign Office, who saw the development of Africa (involving, for instance, bartering coal from Wankie (Hwange) for Argentine beef) as way of freeing Britain from American economic dependence. Even Cripps at the Treasury wanted to ?force the pace? of economic development of colonial Africa as a way to close the dollar gap (p. 239). Such perspectives of high politics are complimented by eccentric information of African development such as the fact that one elephant tusk could only yield three high quality billiard balls (p. 101).

Hyam is known for his interest in Africa, with many of the chapters of this volume concerned with that continent. Refreshingly Churchill is seen, though not exclusively, through his influence on Africa. Curiously, as Hyam acknowledges, with all the mass of volumes on the man there is not a lot written on Churchill and the empire ? though this has recently been rectified by Richard Toye?s recent work (*Churchill?s Empire ? The World That Made Him and the World He Made* (1), though Hyam perhaps was not able to make much use of this due it being published so closely to his own work). Churchill?s first years as a minister in the 1905 Liberal Government are fascinatingly analysed here. Hyam describes Churchill?s attitudes to empire and how it shaped him, especially at the Colonial Office, where ?the Pitt in him jostled with the Puck in him? (p. 304) seeing his grandiose schemes for empire compete with real concern for the welfare of its subjects. Churchill in 1901 we learn after reading a report on poverty could ?see little glory in an Empire which can rule the waves and is unable to flush the sewers? (p. 311).

Hyam valuably analyses the different forms of empire and uses comparative examples, especially French ones, to explain the variations of empire and to eradicate any interpretation of the British Empire as one vast centrally organised hegemony. He instead highlights John Darwin?s work on the formal and informal aspects of rule, protectorates, crown colonies, dominions, mandates etc.(2)

Even for those well read on the British Empire Hyam is able to provide new insights and revive forgotten figures, like Lord Glenelg, Colonial Secretary 1835?9 (defender of indigenous people against unwarranted annexation and interference), 18th-century Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge Peter Peckard and his campaigns to abolish the slave trade, and post-war civil servant, the highly intelligent and working class John Bennett, whose foresights on the end of empire that troubled his more traditional ?betters?.

Hyam is perhaps most famously in known for his work on sexuality and this work proves his continued interest in this area (indeed it is the largest section of the book). Hyam?s level of detail on the subject is almost lurid in its assessment of the ?sexual love of boys?, and profiles of proconsular pederasts especially in ?Greek love in British India: Captain Searight?s manuscript? (pp. 440?70) or Kinseyan comparisons of penis size between black and white males (pp 401?16). His work on the subject, however, shows his pioneering role in making sexuality a subject deserving of its place within the history of empire tent. This inevitably means that he has been criticised by many and Hyam is more than willing to engage on this subject and others with his detractors. Hyam seems in this book most concerned with how post-modernists and post-colonialists are making assumptions and interpretations of empire without real evidence and empirical research. Hyam despairs that even being a nation of tea-drinkers ?can be made to look suspect?

and is dismayed by the ?cavalier dismissal of the need for evidence? that some of the theoretical practitioners have in advancing (for example) food, health, sex and weather arguments on empire with their ?insistence on unconscious assumptions about the empire [which] has a worrying whiff of pseudo-Freudianism about it ...? (p 16). Despite his disagreement with them Hyam is meticulous in recording in the footnotes (or in the main work) the alternative views. Indeed the footnotes are almost worthy of being a book on their own such is their detail and fascinating analysis both intellectual and biographical.

Though this work will have something for all students of empire, those who have an interest in Cambridge?s contribution to the history of the British Empire will have copious pages to devour relating to their alma mater?s influence on, and study of, empire. Linked to this are the Oxbridge men (and some women) who populated the Colonial, Dominion, Commonwealth and Foreign offices. Hyam is at his best in describing the official perspectives of empire and examining the ?long tradition, the experience and personal characteristics? of officials especially in the Colonial Office, which only a very powerful secretary of state could impose his own policy upon. Hyam argues that before 1964 ?little adjustment to new parties was required. Temperamental differences between ministers of whatever political colour were more important, as garrulous character succeeded taciturn, slave-driver replaced indulgent, intellectual followed near-illiterate, or lazy amateur succeeded dedicated professional. Like all civil servants, Colonial Office officials were expected to be unbiased politically. However, in the broadest terms, the ?mind? of the Colonial Office was humane and progressive, unable to identify with extreme right-wing attitudes to empire. They were proud of the empire, but also sceptical about it? (p. 215). Hyam has been criticised for being too sympathetic towards the ?official? part of the empire, but it is more that he provides invaluable insights into the civil service ?mind? at all levels at and beyond Whitehall, giving various perspectives of the Britons running the empire.

This book is not, and nor does it claim to be, a history of the British Empire or any specific part of it. It is, however, a book of remarkable range and scholarship demonstrating a lifetime?s erudition of empire from a leader in the field. Hyam argues that prestige was one of the great motivators of the British Empire and more durable than power. This work has power and prestige and will influence our study of empire regardless of discipline or field. We can only hope that this is not the last work of Hyam to help us, as he has for over the past 50 years, in understanding the British Empire.

Notes

1. Richard Toye?s, *Churchill?s Empire ? The World That Made Him and the World He Made* (London, 2010).Back to (1)
2. John Darwin, ?Britain?s Empires? in *The British Empire ? Themes and Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Stockwell (Oxford, 2008), pp 1?20.Back to (2)

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