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British Government Policy and Decolonisation 1945-1963: Scrutinising the Official Mind

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Author:
Frank Heinlein
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John Kent

At first sight the idea of another scrutiny of the official mind hardly seems likely to add much to the debate on the end of empire. The controversy has somewhat died down in recent years, perhaps because of the plethora of documents emanating from official minds and reproduced in the *British Documents on the End of Empir*e series.(1) Criticism of the latter project has often focussed, albeit unreasonably, on the absence of material from the former non-self-governing territories. Moreover the concept of the official mind, which owes much to the work of Professor William Roger Louis, may open up a can of methodological worms as well as apparently ignoring the many forces within and outside the British government, which assumed importance in the ending of the British empire.

Yet we have a book which, whatever the title, does add to the historiography and to the means by which the end of empire can be best understood and which incorporates a new approach to some of the old questions. In essence, by formulating an account of the British retreat from empire into three distinct analytical frameworks, there is an escape from much work on decolonisation which examines the nature of the transfer of power and the reasons which produced its various stages at different times in different countries. The importance of viewing the end of empire as more than simply the transfer of power is indicated by Frank Heinlein?s tripartite division of each chronological section. The informal empire and the exercise and

projection of British power in the world is one aspect of this tripartite approach; the formal empire of non-self-governing territories another; and the development of the Commonwealth the third part of the story. Each chapter on Attlee, Churchill and Eden and then the two Macmillan governments is treated in this way.

Of course, some would argue that there was no such thing as informal empire, as the exercise of power is distinct from empire and the manifestation of informal empire is not tangible enough to warrant attention. Yet, just as the maintenance of influence was a key component of the formal transfer, so the appearance of this influence was perceived as desirable by British policy makers in ways which reflected something more than power measured in military or economic strength. As one official noticed, power is to be measured in more than money or troops. Prestige, and how it was perceived in relation to Britain is particularly important, even now. With the Empire treated in this more comprehensive way a much fuller story can be told, although this creates a new set of problems.

In an initial discussion about the historiographical treatment of empire, the author points out that books on the end of empire have generally fallen into two categories ? those that treat the empire in general; and those that treat the specifics of a territory in more detail. If the old debate about the relative importance of metropolitan policies, the situation in the colonies and the growing demands of the nationalists and international pressures has been largely superseded, then there is a new tripartite framework offered. Yet the analysis forming the meat on this framework is not always convincing. The book aims to bring new elements into play in analysing the loss of Britain?s empire. In particular, it sets out to look in greater detail at the economic and strategic role of the Commonwealth and the reviews of the Macmillan government, while escaping from the balance sheet idea as an explanation for the abandonment of empire.

The idea, as the author notes, is to argue that British policy responded to the restructuring of the local and international orders which begs the question of who or what restructured them. What this apparently different approach takes us back to is the old question of how much this reconstruction was due to the impact of the Second World War, how much to the Cold War and how much to economic planning at the international and local levels. In addition, the idea of a vague balance sheet constituting the loss of prestige in relation to all three parts of the decolonisation tripod is never fully explored. The balance sheet idea is rejected, not just in terms of economic, profit and loss, but in terms of any form of assessment about loss and gain associated with the decrease or enhancement of British prestige as a world power or as a responsible international player. Thus, although the quest for prestige features strongly in relation to the maintenance of informal empire, its relative importance at different times and compared to other considerations is not easy to pinpoint.

The Cold War is also neglected, in the sense that it is relatively unexplained in terms of strategy and politics; and not understood at all in terms of the difference between cold and hot war. The idea that the Cold War may have influenced the end of informal empire, if not the timing of the transfer of power, because the latter made the war against communism easier to wage is clearly vital and Heinlein does acknowledge this point. Nothing affected the international order more significantly than the Cold War, and American policy towards the British presence in Africa was clearly influenced by it. Yet while the Cold War is well used here to reject the argument of calculations of strategic, or economic, benefits influencing the transfer of power, and to qualify the argument of nationalists simply pressurising Britain to leave, more understanding of the Cold War is clearly needed. In particular a rejection of the orthodox description of containment is badly needed to make more sense of the relationship between Cold War and empire.

In part this lack is an inevitable consequence of the broad task undertaken in the book. It is not so much an attempt to come to grips with a definition of the official mind? but rather to paint a broader picture of the problems and aspirations policy makers faced. On the one hand there was a great variety of official views on various aspects of empire; while on the other hand, a complex array of problems. Some differences can be encapsulated in the views that predominated in different departments, while others within departments and between those in London, those in the bush and those in colonial capitals need teasing out. Thus, in addition to reflecting the varied nature of the problems and different attempts to grapple with them there are also problems in defining the elements of causation and the catalysts of change.

Consequently, although the book is admirably researched (in the sense that a wide array of primary and secondary sources have been looked at), there is the impression that the overall aim has been to consult a wide array of sources across what is a very ambitious and demanding chronological period, rather than to pick out and develop key arguments on the tripartite divisions. For example, on the issue of informal empire, Heinlein sometimes appears to prefer to describe the many things that could be said to relate to it, rather than to explain what it meant at different periods. This deepens the problem of distinguishing a number of explanatory factors that could apply to both formal and informal empires.

For example, in the chapter on the Attlee government, it is noted that there was a crucial difference between the initial Colonial Office desire to develop means to help colonial producers, and the desire of other departments of the British government to increase exports of tropical produce to the dollar zone, or use them as replacements for dollar purchases. This was accompanied by Bevin's and the Foreign Office's idea of the 'Third World Power' (not explored in the book), the cultivation of which would enable Britain and Europe and the empire, backed by the Dominions, to develop resources equal to the USSR and the US through development of what was referred to as the 'middle of the planet'. By combining the area forming Western Europe, the Middle East and Africa under British leadership, formal empire would be transcended and become a more informal embodiment of Britain as a world power. The difficulty of establishing the boundary between what constitutes formal and informal empire is clear, as is the difficulty of clarifying the linkage between them. Heinlein suggests that under Attlee the distinction was defined in terms of a perceived need to maintain a military presence and formal rule whenever there was no likelihood of a sufficiently strong government replacing British administration. This does not fit easily with the justifications for remaining in Egypt after transferring power or with the lack of consideration in Africa of the immediate possibilities of independent states being created. The dichotomy between the different strands is often in evidence; but the author hints that there was no overall policy for them all, instead of suggesting there could not have been one, because the changing nature of the international order and the perceived role of empire did not allow for one.

It is easy to find fault with a book that to its credit aims so high and does more (and less) than subject the 'official mind' to close scrutiny. Yet the achievements of the book are also easy to identify. It covers many areas of the British Empire from India, and South East Asia, to the Middle East and Africa, and touches on British Guiana and the West Indian Federation. There is material on economics, with the role of the sterling area featuring strongly. European issues are referred to, in discussions of Plan G and the consideration of a two-tier Commonwealth along with the admission of European members. Multi-racialism and the important consideration of Africa in the coming decade of the 1960s are also incorporated into the considerable coverage of the Macmillan years. The author appears not to have had the opportunity to consult the *British Documents on the End of Empire* on the Macmillan and Home governments, which in some ways makes the archival work even more impressive.

There is some perceptive analysis of why the formal empire was abandoned. The idea of having to find a middle way, between the Algeria of multi-racial disaster and war on the one hand, and the Congo crisis of secession and chaos on the other, is a useful way of describing the dilemma facing the British government. And it indicates how international considerations figured strongly in the final years of African empire. The argument that it was the difficulty of transferring power, more than the desire to keep control that accounted for delay in the retreat is convincing. It might have been desirable to devote more space to the big question

of why the South Asian non-self-governing territories achieved independence at the time they did, when African colonies and the informal empire were seen as vital to Britain?s future. For example, the argument that when nationalist pressures threatened stability (as they did in India and Burma) power was transferred, and when they did not power was transferred to pre-empt it (as in Ceylon) does not explain reactions to Enosis, Mau Mau or the war in the Aden protectorates. The author refers to the importance of Britain?s international standing and emphasises the impact of the changed international situation and the problems in individual territories as factors that made continuation of colonial rule difficult. Yet it is the connection between them and their combined impact that needs emphasis in determining the nature and timing of the transfer of power.

Nevertheless some of the analysis of the motives at work in the abandonment of formal empire is convincing and informative. The idea presented in the book ? that it was not so much a question of finding reasons for leaving, as of finding a reason for staying that provides the main explanation of British policy ? is important. It also explains the difficulty historians have had in finding a cause for the abandonment of formal empire, as opposed to seeking to describe policies aimed continually at minimising the relative difficulties in retaining or jettisoning it. The idea that the Foreign Office was primarily interested after 1956 in Britain?s international standing, as opposed to the Colonial Office?s emphasis on the needs of individual colonies, is well brought out, as is the prevention of Soviet penetration, although it was often more the case of needing to prevent the conditions that were perceived as conducive to the facilitation of Communism.

However in the discussion of informal empire some of the key questions are answered less convincingly. British policymakers, it is argued, believed they had to maintain a world role in which overseas commitments involving the deployment of British forces were an important element. The rationales for this, given by Heinlein, were to maintain prestige and standing, to contribute to the containment of communism, to secure a privileged position in relation to the US, to protect British assets and to preserve the stability of the pound. The first of these stands out from the documents at all times, but the other four, if not grotesque justifications for the lack of substance in the first, are at least questionable. Moreover, without entering into such debates, the intangible elements cannot be used to support the conclusion that if maintaining the commitments informal empire involved was counter-productive, policymakers could not be expected to realise this at the time. This old argument, justifying the sensible management of the retreat from empire and international decline, is difficult to reconcile with the importance given to the pursuit of prestige. Even if prestige was pursued in order to bring concrete advantages in line with the other four goals, rather than the other goals being used as a justification for the pursuit of prestige, the first consideration of the policymakers should have been the relative advantages and disadvantages of the policies. To argue that for 18 years the alternatives could not have been conceived of, when the disadvantages of maintaining commitments were often noted, is rather extraordinary. The files are full of occasions when prestige was given as the essential reason for not cutting costs or reducing overseas commitments, because the costs of losing prestige were said to be greater. Interestingly in the case of oil, the claim that policy makers wanted to invade Egypt, not to protect prestige, but to protect the Canal and prevent Nasser cutting off the supply of oil, when this was precisely what would guarantee the stopping of the oil (as indeed happened), is a good example of the relationship between oil, economic advantage and prestige. Prestige was indeed connected to material interests, but arguably in ways radically different to those suggested in this book.

Another problem underlying the book?s treatment of prestige and its importance compared to the alleged tangible goals of informal empire, is the way the book dismisses the idea that interests (in the form of areas of strategic importance) were considered more important than politics and prestige, rather than as subordinate to them. Furthermore, the claim that in informal empire concessions could be made if loss of face was prevented, as in Egypt and Iran, rather misses the point. The continued existence of informal empire required that concessions could not be made without losing face: hence the efforts (one successful, one not) to overthrow the regimes in Iran and Egypt, which had strong anti-British movements that required Britain to lose face to become more successful.

Despite these criticisms this is an important book which adds to and should lead to the further development

of interpretations of the end of empire, based firmly on the type of distinctive approach made here. It provides a contribution that stands out from many recent works and is a necessary read for both students and established scholars.

Notes

1. For full details of the *British Documents on the End of Empire* project and its publications, see http://www.sas.ac.uk/commonwealthstudies/research/bdeep.html [2]. Back to (1)

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