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Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World

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Andrew Porter

Niall Ferguson is a glutton for exposure. From January to mid-February 2003 six one-hour television programmes, four lectures to substantial audiences in the University of London's Senate House, and a large glossy book have been devoted to his theme of 'empire' or, as he also puts it, 'how Britain made the modern world'. Elsewhere, for example in *The Times* (6-7 January 2003), there have been extracts taken from the book. What was the point of all this activity, including as it did a two year crash-course in selected reading from the recent subject literature and extensive globe-trotting? Was its upshot, as Ferguson asks of the empire itself, 'a good or a bad thing'?

Considering the published output, as with 'the empire' of the past, this is in many respects a pointless question, for the answer depends on where questioners stand and what in particular they choose to look at. From the point of view of personal enrichment, Ferguson himself doubtless found the operation of the free media market a very good thing, as will his publisher. In terms of entertainment, pleasure, a measure of general interest or instruction, and stimulation, many of the 2.5 million viewers of Channel 4's offerings will have felt themselves well rewarded, if two *Daily Telegraph* reviews (10 and 24 January 2003) and a column after the first episode by William Rees-Mogg in *The Times* are anything to judge by. Others, who as one might naturally expect received nothing from the proceeds, either were soothed by Ferguson's Scottish lilt and burrs, or were driven to apoplectic outbursts. Among the latter was Jon Wilson in *The Guardian* (8

February 2003), condemning (with an alliteration worthy of Ferguson himself) what appeared to him a 'glossy glorification of imperial violence', possessing a tendency to 'encourage policy based on a version of the history of empire that is simply wrong'.⁽¹⁾

Such points about the reception of Ferguson's work in their limited way parallel the historic experience and impact of empire itself. It was almost everywhere far too multi-faceted or ambiguous for the application of crude general labels, 'good' or 'bad', to do justice to the complex issues involved. This was from the start an insurmountable problem for a subject rightly treated as global in scope, which also demanded a chronological coverage from the late sixteenth to the early twenty-first century. Although Ferguson devotes significantly more space to the period after circa 1800, the problem remains.

However, doing justice to complex issues can also be understood in different ways. The demonstration of complexity may take the form of impressing audiences with inescapable detail, illustrating in the process the inadequacy of current generalizations and conventional views. Alternatively, it can entail the ruthless imposition of dominant themes on a heap of fact, winnowing and threshing until a mountain of factual chaff has been bagged and fairly stored in its proper 'subordinate' place. Ferguson evidently wishes to do both of these things. Fond of phrases such as 'most people assume', 'nowadays it is quite common to think', he sees himself as a new radical, despatching to its resting place a tired conventional wisdom that holds empire to have been always either exploitative, or unnecessary, and everywhere thoroughly wasteful for both colonisers and colonised (pp. xviii-xix). This he does by drawing out the legacies of Britain's empire. He offsets the brutality and destruction associated with slavery, piracy, and events such as the Morant Bay rebellion (1865) or the Amritsar massacre (1919), with factual information to illustrate the triumph of capitalism, the spread of parliamentary institutions, the growth of literacy, recognition of the virtues of the minimal state, and the rule of law (pp. xxiv-xxv). The dominant theme he wields in order to corral untidy detail is that of 'globalization', a process in which Britain's empire more than any other agency promoted 'the optimal allocation of labour, capital and goods in the world' (p. xx). Ferguson has no doubt that Empire 'enhanced global welfare' in other words was a Good Thing.

In both cases, Ferguson metes out rough justice to complexity. It is easy to find examples of conventionally wholly critical or uncritical judgements on empire, but Ferguson is misguided in assuming that these persist in the absence of an historical literature providing material for more discriminating and nuanced assessments of empire's record. The survival and persistence of those judgements reflect not persuasion but inadequate reading and thought, conditions unlikely to be disturbed by the appearance of a new set of no less conventional views. Ferguson's own 'on-balance-beneficial' legacy of empire offers no new insight but rather the refurbishment of a much older conventional 'some would say Whiggish' wisdom. Far from updating our view of empire, in highlighting the interplay of 'liberty' and 'slavery', Ferguson looks backward to an outdated literature, and at times is consequently wide of the mark 'as when assessing the significance of the Durham Report as 'the book which saved the empire' (pp. 111-13). As for 'globalization', now well-established as a fashionable resort for the conceptually starved, what does one make of the claim that it optimises the allocation of material resources? When one man's optimum can so easily encompass another's poverty, just as orthodoxy and heresy may be interchangeable, these can too easily become weasel words, traps for the unwary even if the statistics of measurement such as GDP are to be relied upon, which often they are not. Arrangements optimal for the continued working of a system of exchange may not necessarily be so when assessed in terms of individual or even communal wellbeing.

Inevitably there will be those who wonder whether such over-simplifications are not merely the product of a television producer's requirements triumphing over the historian's need for greater attention to the difficulty of presenting major historical problems in any visual format. After all, Ferguson's book is very much the book of the film, a fleshier version of what is for the most part clearly spelt out on the screen. There is little evidence of an opportunity being taken to refine arguments rather than thicken narrative. For example, the movement from British abolition of the slave trade to the emancipation of the empire's slaves was far less smooth and confident than is suggested here (p. 122). Sir Charles Dilke's book *Problems of Greater Britain* (Macmillan; London, 1890) is mentioned, but not his earlier *Greater Britain* (Macmillan; London, 1868), presumably because that would upset an argument linking the term 'Greater Britain' to J. R. Seeley's *Expansion of England*

(London; Macmillan) published in 1883 (pp. 246-7).

That said, however, the visual aspects of the programmes and the illustrations in the book are often splendid and fresh to the eye. The programmes are certainly best seen well spaced. Consecutive videos are too likely to impress viewers with the limits to both the range of available visual devices and the film-maker's budget. There are many suns setting, plenty of light on water, frequent shots of Ferguson in boats or canoes, the sound of his foot-fall on floorboards crossing to a window or to a mahogany table for displaying a document. Cuttings, for example from the same colourful Indian scene, provide the backdrop or continuity on more than one occasion. The book in one respect at least is more modest – readers are not treated to the screen's many instances of full-frontal Ferguson poised to make eye contact with a key pronouncement about liberty or slaves. Nevertheless, precisely the same points are made on the page, decked out with the same catchy or demotic phraseology. Ferguson has a quick eye for the riveting analogy – New South Wales, 'the eighteenth-century equivalent of Mars', where Australians 'started out as a nation of shoplifters' (pp. 103, 106). Arresting, yes, but not always apposite (for reasons which, in this case, Joseph Banks might have explained), and so at risk of disguising reality with cosmetic flippancy.

It is strange that someone such as Ferguson, well-acquainted with thinking about virtual history, other possible outcomes to any chance sequence of events, and alternative futures, should comprehensively ignore this analytical dimension in the case of empire. Occasional references are made, for instance, to the possibility of a French not a British victory in mid-eighteenth-century India. In calculating imperial Britain's favourable legacy, the twentieth-century alternative empires of Germany, Italy and Japan are cited to provide horrific counterweights, had they managed to turn conquest into more than temporary colonial controls. At the same time, however, Ferguson seems to believe that for most areas of the world the experience of imperial rule offered the only way to the future. This begs many questions. Why, for example, should one assume that eighteenth-century India could not have evolved its own economic path, with distributions of capital, labour and goods 'optimal' in the eyes of its own elites however different from the criteria of liberal western political economists? The work of regional historians gives grounds for disputing such an assumption, and thus for questioning perceptions of backwardness and modernity conditioned in the west, but Ferguson does not pay it any attention.

After alternative histories, it is perhaps worth probing further Ferguson's use of the term 'globalization'. How is it to be understood, either in chronological terms, or functionally? His terminology refers to 'modern globalization' (pp. xix-xx), but also to earlier eras or phases of globalization. Sometimes these appear to be separated out and discontinuous, but he also knits them together in a single period and process. Should globalization be taken to mean little more than the far-flung existence of even limited economic activity involving a major power's (e.g. Britain's) nationals? Or is it to be understood as an active process of territorial integration into a world-wide market economy? In both cases, 'globalization' is apparently a continuing feature, albeit one, Ferguson seems to suggest, in which the phase 1850-1914 was characterised by the economic equalization of incomes, and the second half of the twentieth century was one of mounting economic divergence and inequality. There is a fuzziness here in the handling of globalization, whether as concept, descriptive category, or economic process, that needs to be cleared away.

This need for clarity is further indicated by Ferguson's lack of sustained attention to the history of globalization stretching back well before 1815. There is much in the history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to support the view that a process of globalization was also then underway. Ferguson himself refers in passing to the seventeenth century's 'globalization with gunboats' (p.18). Doubtless the balance of power and wealth among, and so the contribution made by, participating states was then different from that which developed later on; and 'globalization' had perhaps not yet become global in its reach. It may be debated whether there was a distinctly 'early modern globalization', or merely an earlier phase of a single process. It is more important, however, to recognise that the prominence of war and economic protection or monopolization meant that the characteristics of that earlier age were very different from, and the process of globalization was largely driven by forces unlike, those that Ferguson suggests operated during the British-dominated phase of globalization after 1850.

If it is accepted that there was an early modern globalization under way well before the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, that its momentum owed much to war both internationally and on local colonial frontiers, and that the prominent role of Britain in the Caribbean, North America, and parts of Asia means that it too deserves the ghastly appellation of 'Anglobalization' (p. xxiii), then this has implications for Ferguson's portrayal of the post-1850 period. From then onwards Ferguson seems to allow that the global accumulation of wealth was promoted only by an increasing absence of restraint on the movement of people (labour migration), the flow of capital (external investment), and produce from land (overseas commerce). This argument is unpersuasive because it ignores the role of war, economic protection, and strategic calculation, persisting from that earlier period, in the continuing growth of a global economy. Britain's many colonial wars in the nineteenth century and beyond were an essential aid to the incorporation of new territories into her own empire, and to the expansion of free trade both within her colonies and into areas beyond the reach of her direct rule. Furthermore, in Ferguson's contemporary age of 'modern globalization', echoes of the early modern period are to be found in the way in which world economic patterns are decisively shaped by the protectionist agenda of the United States and the states which have come to make up the European Union, notably in respect of their domestic agriculture.

This last observation directs us not only to the compatibility of continuing globalization with partially-closed economies, but also to the limitations of free trade arrangements historically associated with the pursuit of an open global economy. Contrary to much current thinking, Ferguson wishes us to accept that the priority attached by Britain to free trade, free labour migration, and unfettered capital movements, was beneficial to Britain itself, to its empire, and to the world at large. The extension of her empire not least contributed to the global growth of GDP, because Britain was the 'least protectionist' of all the great powers. By this yardstick, the British empire was 'a good thing', British rule being largely supportive of economic growth. It can surely be argued that this simple standard requires a more critical consideration than Ferguson ever suggests that it might need.

Two points are fundamental. First, it is surely necessary to bear in mind that the pattern of free trade, particularly in the form of unlimited exchange of foodstuffs and raw materials for manufactured capital and consumer goods, generally operates over any significant period of time to the decided disadvantage of commodity producers. Free trade might become one of the pillars of 'Anglobalization' but at the same time was likely to restrict and impoverish the less economically 'modernised' party. The second follows from that: free trade cannot necessarily be equated with freedom of choice and opportunity. For example, the time at which any territory is drawn through the opening up of its trade into the globalizing economy can have a critical impact on its future development. The great variety of combinations of climate, geographical position, and natural endowment of resources, inevitably mean that each territory may be more or less well-placed to find its own niche in the range of economic openings prevailing at any one time. Hence, as Donald Denoon demonstrated in his *Settler Capitalism* (Clarendon; Oxford, 1983), temperate lands of white settlement, faced with exclusion from industrial and manufacturing options, not only evolved their own forms of capitalism but did so largely irrespective of their colonial or independent status. Moreover the distribution of any gains within individual states was often not directed to equalizing incomes. Ferguson is to be applauded for his realism in calling on historians at least to consider not ideal worlds but inescapably imperfect worlds, in which the option of 'Anglobalization' was if not the best, then perhaps the least worst course available. However, the reality of the imperialism of free trade that underlay this option was far more constraining and less benign than Ferguson seems to acknowledge. It was, of course, greatly to Britain's own advantage as the world's major industrial power for much of the nineteenth century that she should insist on the expansion of free trade, while at the same time facing little serious competition in the new markets she was exploiting.

A last comment relates still more directly to the persistent issue of costs and benefits. As befits any public performer, Ferguson is fond of catching his audience's attention with striking juxtapositions of images and arguments. Stark intellectual polarities, however, can be a snare and delusion especially in the history of empire, so riddled as it is with complexities and ambiguity. In seeking to argue that the empire was not

economically bad for both Britain and her colonies, Ferguson sets up an Aunt Sally no less grand and vulnerable than that constructed by some of the historians he criticises. Consider his inclusion in the bibliography to Chapter 5 of Robert Huttenback's and Lance Davis's *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge), a book extensively debated when it appeared in 1986. Its messages have nonetheless not been taken heed of here. Whatever the problems presented by that work (and they were numerous), Davis and Huttenback confirmed above all the need to ask of imperial commitments and colonial possessions who benefited, from what, and when. In demonstrating that fortunately-placed individuals, particular social classes and identifiable types of business, in both metropole and colonies, gained or lost in varying degrees and at different times, they argued convincingly for a more discriminating and modulated scrutiny of the empire's political economy than was then available. They also proved beyond doubt the crucial incidence of taxation and the costs of defence to any assessment of costs and benefits. Ferguson, however, seems in effect to argue that the association of global economic growth with both the element of redistribution inherent in the workings of a free-market system, and the existence of Britain's free-trade empire, were sufficient ? as Lewis Carroll would put it ? for all to have prizes. That surely represents a significant retreat from the ground so usefully opened up to debate some fifteen years ago.

Notes

1. For the full text of this article, see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,891477,00.html> [2].[Back to \(1\)](#)

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