



Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power

By Niall Ferguson

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The British Empire was the largest in all history: the nearest thing to world domination ever achieved. By the eve of World War II, around a quarter of the world's land surface was under some form of British rule. Yet for today's generation, the British Empire seems a Victorian irrelevance. The time is ripe for a reappraisal, and in *Empire*, Niall Ferguson boldly recasts the British Empire as one of the world's greatest modernizing forces. An important new work of synthesis and revision, *Empire* argues that the world we know today is in large measure the product of Britain's Age of Empire. The spread of capitalism, the communications revolution, the notion of humanitarianism, and the institutions of parliamentary democracy—all these can be traced back to the extraordinary expansion of Britain's economy, population, and culture from the seventeenth century until the mid-twentieth. On a vast and vividly colored canvas, *Empire* shows how the British Empire acted as midwife to modernity. Displaying the originality and rigor that have made him the brightest light among British historians, Ferguson shows that the story of the Empire is pregnant with lessons for today—in particular for the United States as it stands on the brink of a new era of imperial power, based once again on economic and military supremacy. A dazzling tour de force, *Empire* is a remarkable reappraisal of the prizes and pitfalls of global empire.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

At its peak in the nineteenth century, the British Empire was the largest empire ever known, governing roughly a quarter of the world's population. In *Empire*, Niall Ferguson explains how "an archipelago of rainy islands... came to rule the world," and examines the costs and consequences, both good and bad, of British imperialism. Though the book's breadth is impressive, it is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the British Empire; rather, Ferguson seeks to glean lessons from this history for future, or present, empires--namely America. Pointing out that the U.S. is both a product of the British Empire as well as an heir to it, he asks whether America--an "empire in denial"--should "seek to shed or to shoulder the imperial load it has inherited." As he points out in this fascinating book, there is compelling evidence for both.

Observing that "the difficulty with the achievements of empire is that they are much more likely to be taken for granted than the sins of empire," Ferguson stresses that the British did do much good for humanity in their quest for domination: promotion of the free movement of goods, capital, and labor and a common rule of law and governance chief among them. "The question is not whether British imperialism was without blemish. It was not. The question is whether there could have been a less bloody path to modernity," he writes. The challenge for the U.S., he argues, is for it to use its undisputed power as a force for positive change in the world and not to fall into some of the same traps as the British before them.

Covering a wide range of topics, including the rise of consumerism (initially fueled by a desire for coffee, tea, tobacco, and sugar), the biggest mass migration in history (20 million emigrants between the early 1600s and the 1950s), the impact of missionaries, the triumph of capitalism, the spread of the English language, and globalization, this is a brilliant synthesis of various topics and an extremely entertaining read. --*Shawn Carkonen*

From Publishers Weekly

Acclaimed British historian Ferguson (*The Pity of War*) takes the revisionist (or perhaps re-revisionist) position that the British Empire was, on balance, a good thing, that it "impos[ed] free markets, the rule of law... and relatively incorrupt government" on a quarter of the globe. Ferguson's imperial boosterism differs from more critical recent scholarship on the empire, such as Linda Colley's *Captives* and Simon Schama's *A History of Britain: The Fate of Empire*. Ferguson's gracefully written narrative traces the history of the empire from its beginnings in the 16th century. As Ferguson tells it, by the 18th century British consumers had developed a strong taste for sugar, tobacco, coffee, tea and other imports. The empire's role was to supply these commodities and to offer cheap land to British settlers. Not until the late 18th century did Britain add a "civilizing mission" to its commercial motives. Liberals in Britain, often fired by religious feelings, abolished the slave trade and then set out to Christianize indigenous peoples. Ferguson gives a wonderful account of the fabled career of missionary and explorer David Livingstone. The author admits that the British sometimes responded to native opposition with brutality and racism. Yet he argues that other empires, especially those of Germany and Japan, were far more brutal (a not entirely satisfying defense). Indeed, Ferguson contends that Britain nobly sacrificed its empire in order to defeat these imperial rivals in WWII. His provocative and elegantly written account will surely trigger debate, if not downright vilification, among history readers and postcolonial scholars. 25 color illus., b&w illus., maps.

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From [Booklist](#)

Past, present, and future meet in British historian Ferguson's provocative take on British history. His primary assertion is that "for better, for worse--fair and foul--the world we know today is in large measure the product of Britain's Age of Empire." Impressive facts and figures come first in his account--chiefly, that the empire Britain assembled was the biggest in world history, "bar none." But why did it disappear? Ferguson's answers to that question are underscored by his insistence that Americans should--no, *must*--understand the loss of empire and its implications for the U.S. Since the global hegemony enjoyed by Britain disintegrated, will the superpower status currently exercised by the U.S. do likewise? Or, as Ferguson poetically yet emphatically phrases the issue, "Should the United States seek to shed or to shoulder the imperial load it has inherited?" The lesson here may have been taught before--history informs current events--but it is a lesson that deserves to be retaught regularly. *Brad Hooper*

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