Understanding the British Empire

Understanding the British Empire draws on a lifetime's research and reflection on the history of the British empire by one of the senior figures in the field. Essays cover six key themes: the geopolitical and economic dynamics of empire, religion and ethics, imperial bureaucracy, the contribution of political leaders, the significance of sexuality, and the shaping of imperial historiography. A major new introductory chapter draws together the wider framework of Dr Hyam's studies and several new chapters focus on lesser known figures. Other chapters are revised versions of earlier papers, reflecting some of the debates and controversies raised by the author's work, including the issue of sexual exploitation, the European intrusion into Africa, including the African response to missionaries, trusteeship, and Winston Churchill's imperial attitudes. Combining traditional archival research with newer forms of cultural exploration, this is an unusually wide-ranging approach to key aspects of empire.

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To the Master, Fellows, and Scholars of the College of
St Mary Magdalene in gratitude for a fifty-year association

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Preface

It is fifty years since my engagement with the British empire and world history began, and so this volume is something of a celebration; it is also my swansong.

Whatever else historians may claim to do, they are likely to be students of human nature. Indeed, for Hume, the chief value of history is discovery of the principles of human nature: 'Human Nature is the only science of man.'[1] Two aspects of this have long fascinated me: how people arrive at decisions, and how they manage sexuality. As fields of intellectual inquiry, these are not quite so disparate as they might seem, at least not if we view them as the twin axes around which much of active life revolves. Both can be observed playing out on the imperial stage at their most complex and contentious. Understanding the British empire needs – among other things, of course – engagement with the realities of government decision-making as it related to overseas territories, and scrutiny of sexualities expressed in the context of other communities and other traditions.

These two aspects of empire underpin many of the six themes which form the backbone of this set of essays: geopolitical and economic dynamics, religion, bureaucracy, individual agency, sexuality, and historiography. Each of these contributes, I believe, to a better appreciation of the nature of the imperial system. The book cannot, however, be a comprehensive guide to the understanding of the British empire, which would be a presumptuous undertaking indeed, now that historical approaches to it are so riven with methodological diversity. It is not an advice manual, more of an academic confection. Nor – with one exception (chapter 4) – does it engage much with other historians' theories. Not that I have anything against the intussusception of new ideas or fresh approaches. But theories and methodological fashions come and go. When the excitement about post-colonial studies has died down, it should be possible to re-examine the enduring and elemental bedrock laid down by 'old' imperial history. As Jonathan Clark writes: 'A new pattern is beginning to emerge which will soon demand a reconsideration of the

nature of imperialism and identity . . . ideas, policy and religion will take the place of post-modernism's weakness for symbol and ceremony, and allow us to answer the harder historical questions of when and why.' This, he suggests, can only come about when we free ourselves from the preoccupation with history's 'present-day function'.[2]

To this it might be added that history also 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 the tendencies of human nature, the operation of governments, the motives of rulers, the predicaments of the governed, the reasonings of politicians, and the techniques of bureaucrats. Let us contemplate the diversity of 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.

One of the themes in this book deals with imperial historians. I suggest that we should know something of their background and assumptions. Perhaps, therefore, I may be allowed to explain where I am 'coming from'. Why is it, as a survivor from the late imperial age, that I do not feel myself to be a child of empire – still less to be 'saturated with imperialism', which post-colonial historians claim should have been the case?

My upbringing was, I think, fairly typical of the 'popular culture' which 'popular imperialism' is said to have sustained. I come from a family of lower-middle class shop-keepers.[3] I can be classified as an archetypal post-war 'scholarship boy', attending a small suburban grammar school, from 1947 to 1954, where there was nothing imperial to be seen or heard. (We did once consider a topic from Kipling in our lively and popular debating society, but it was only whether we preferred 'flannelled fools to muddied oafs'.) The colonies did not surface in the history syllabus after 1776. I doubt if any of us could have named an 'empire' figure, apart from Don Bradman, the Australian cricketer knighted in 1949, and Gandhi, famous for his skeletal appearance (one especially gaunt and bony boy was nicknamed 'Gandhi'). If you had asked us about the Empire, we would have assumed you meant the Chiswick Empire, a music hall two miles down the road. Henty and Haggard passed me by – I read about Sherlock Holmes and Biggles. If I was 'saturated' in anything it was monarchy not empire. I was taken to Ludgate Hill to see the victory procession to St Paul's Cathedral in 1945; and I stood on the Embankment (with 30,000 other schoolchildren, chosen by ballot) for the coronation procession in 1953; on both occasions the whole point was to see the king or queen, and there was little

to help us make sense of all those colourful marching contingents; they were essentially *royal* not *imperial* occasions.[4] In its wisdom, Middlesex County Council commemorated the coronation by presenting each of its grammar school boys with a handsomely bound copy of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* – not exactly overflowing with imperial resonances, though Brazil is mentioned.

Apart from the coronation, the great events of my schooldays were the end of the war, the London Olympic Games of 1948 (no colonial athlete caught the imagination like Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia or Fanny Blankers-Koen of Holland), the Festival of Britain in 1951, and the much-lamented death of King George VI in the following year. The Festival of Britain, by the way, was purely a celebration of domestic achievements, the organisers displaying an invincible (and surely realistic) determination to ignore the empire. Apart from a neighbour who grumbled occasionally about the Labour government's groundnuts scheme, such exposure as I had to the empire came solely from the newsreels which formed an integral part of every cinema performance – brief but grim presentations of upheavals like the Malayan emergency and Mau Mau in Kenya, faraway countries of which we knew nothing, except that 'our brave soldiers and people' were there, exposed to danger. Between 1950 and 1956 I saw 133 films – a demotic sampling, some old, some new, but barely a handful with imperial settings, and these easily outnumbered by Westerns.[5]

National Service with the Royal Air Force, from 1954 to 1956, provided no enlightenment about British imperial responsibilities, not even why we might be posted to hot-spots like Cyprus or Aden, fortunately not my fate. It was only when I was taught as an undergraduate by 'Robbie' Robinson that I became interested in, or even properly aware of, the empire. This was in my finals year, 1959.

For most of my working life I have been essentially an 'archival' historian, with the bulk of my research taking place on government files in the old Public Record Office, now The National Archives at Kew. I spent twelve years with the prestigious British Documents on the End of Empire Project after it was launched in 1987. However, since I also had students to teach and to stimulate, my intellectual horizons moved beyond official files and embraced wider themes, especially the cultural aspects of empire. By the 1970s I was becoming convinced that sexuality ought to be an accepted subject of academic inquiry. I had always lectured as much as I could on the problems of race, and my 'turn to sexuality' seemed to be a good way of thinking about 'otherness' and the unexpected outcomes of interaction between Europeans and indigenous peoples.[6]

In accordance, then, with what has been for me a varied pattern of historical activity, several of these essays examine metropolitan motivation and decision-making, for example by the post-war Labour government, and the outlook of famous men, such as Churchill and Smuts. Not all of the chapters are about 'high politics', however. Some of the central ones focus upon people hardly known to history at all. These include an eighteenth-century preacher (Dr Peter Peckard), a twentieth-century Indian Army officer (Captain Kenneth Searight), a middle-ranking Colonial Office official (John Bennett), and a lowly, lecherous member of the Colonial Service in Kenya (Hubert Silberrad). The case-studies of individuals are used to illuminate larger problems, from the abolition of the slave trade to the 'official mind' and the 'end of empire', as well as masculinity and sexual promiscuity. In a similar spirit, the historiographical chapters deal with research students as well as Robinson and Gallagher and other leading historians. Some chapters consider how economic interests fit into the larger scheme of things, how the interlocking of global and local situations shaped the partition of Africa, and how engagement with 'other' peoples not only affected missionary enterprise, but also influenced the doctrines of trusteeship, and even perceptions of the male body.

This is not a conventional volume of 'collected essays'. It is not even a representative selection of my papers. Several of what I might regard as my 'core' publications are omitted, either because they have not stood the test of time well (or at least have served their purpose, such as 1960s or 1970s review articles), or because they have already been absorbed into book form.[7] Half of the eighteen essays are newly written or heavily revised. The result, I hope, manages to span a diverse group of subjects, combining traditional documentary history with at least some of the newer types of cultural exploration, within the covers of a single-authored book, in an integrated way not perhaps often attempted.

All the drafts of the new and revised essays have been read by a number of friends and colleagues, and I have been happy to draw on their good sense and unrivalled knowledge. The long introduction – a reflective commentary attempting to pull the collection together – has benefited from the scrutiny of two of my most loyal associates, Roger Louis (with whom I edited BDEEP documents on decolonisation) and Ged Martin (my former pupil, and later collaborator on a previous book of essays about the empire).[8] Roger also commented on the last two chapters about imperial historians, while both he and Ged made helpful suggestions about my account of John Bennett. Tim Harper, Peter Hennessy, Ashley Jackson, and Tom Licence kindly gave me their reactions to other sections. But above all, I am hugely indebted to another

of my distinguished former students, Piers Brendon. The shaping of this entire project owes an enormous amount to his guidance, criticism, and enthusiasm, and to his generosity in providing congenial lunches. Piers has read every word, and suggested many improvements, though I'm afraid he will disapprove of my unwillingness to purge every last concession to contemporary jargon. Finally, once again I acknowledge gratefully the support of Andrew Brown and Michael Watson at Cambridge University Press – to say nothing of their exceptionally helpful expert anonymous readers.

RH
Magdalene College

Notes

1. David Hume, *A treatise of human nature* (1739, 1888 edn), book I, pt IV, section vii (p. 273).
2. Jonathan Clarke, review of T. Claydon, *Europe and the making of England, 1660–1760*, in *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5489 (13 June 2008), p. 7.
3. In other words, that class of people which Sir John Seeley, first among imperial historians, described as sunk in 'dead-level, insipid, barren, abject, shop-keeping life', and to whom university education should be brought with missionary zeal: J.R. Seeley, *A Midland university: an address* (Birmingham, 1887), p. 16.
4. The coronation was a public holiday and took up all day for many people. I got up at 5.15 a.m., to catch the train to Waterloo, and later watched television replays at my great-uncle's until 11 p.m. (incidentally the first time I had seen TV) – my diary entry for the day ends, 'So I was thoroughly soaked in the Coronation.'
5. Since the evidence for all this comes from my teenage diaries, unpublished, the best I can offer by way of verification is the two-volume memoir of the 1940s and 1950s by my contemporary Tony Betts, who lived a few hundred yards away from me and went to the same schools (though we were not friends): *Wassa matter mate, somebody 'itchyer? A suburban childhood* (Brighton, 2001), and *The key of the door: rhythm and romance in a post-war London adolescence* (Wimborne, 2006). By its absence he does, I think, confirm my assertion that the empire had no meaning for lower-middle class suburban families like ours. (See more on this, p. 16 below.)
6. It is even possible that, if I am remembered at all, it will be as a 'pioneering and contentious' historian of sex: see Stephen Howe's description of my *Empire and sexuality: the British experience* (1990, 1991, 1998) in Sarah Stockwell, ed., *The British empire: themes and perspectives* (2008), ch. 7, 'Empire and ideology', p. 174, n. 37. It simply is not true that it took Edward Said to 'reorient studies of empire towards cultural encounters, loosening the vice-like grip of Robinson and Gallagher (and their students) over the

study of the imperial past' (Tony Ballantyne, writing in the same volume, p. 178). The development of the cultural dimension owes more to James (Jan) Morris than it does to Said: *Pax Britannica: the climax of an empire* (1968) was an inspiring landmark for many of us, published ten years before Said's *Orientalism*, which itself appeared two years after my *Britain's imperial century* (1st edn, 1976), with its emphasis on many cultural themes, such as sport and social life, masculinity and medical praxis, missions, freemasonry, and scouting, as well as sex and race relations.

7. In particular, the articles on Anglo-South African relations are now embedded in my joint book with Peter Henshaw, *The lion and the springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge, 2003).
8. *Reappraisals in British imperial history* (1975).

Acknowledgements

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Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History (chapters 1, 8, 13, 15, and 17)
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Oxford history of the British empire (chapter 7)
Round Table: the Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs (chapter 12)
Erotic Review (chapter 14).

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Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
BDEEP	British Documents on the End of Empire Project
CAB	Cabinet Office records
CBE	Commander of (the Order of) the British Empire
CHBE	*Cambridge history of the British empire*
CIE	Companion of (the Order of) the Indian Empire
CMG	Commander of (the Order of) St Michael and St George
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CO	Colonial Office
COS	Chiefs of Staff
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
DLitt	Doctor of Letters (higher degree)
DNB	*Dictionary of national biography*
DO	Dominions Office/CRO records
FBA	Fellow of the British Academy
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FO	Foreign Office
HMG	His/Her Majesty's Government
HMSO	His/Her Majesty's Stationery Office
IBEA	Imperial British East Africa (Company)
JICH	*Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*
LMS	London Missionary Society
LSE	London School of Economics
OBE	Officer of (the Order of) the British Empire
ODNB	*Oxford dictionary of national biography* (2004)
OHBE	*Oxford history of the British empire* (1998–9)
OUP	Oxford University Press
PD	Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*
P&O	Peninsular & Orient (Steamship Company)
PM	Prime Minister

PREM	Prime Minister's Office records
PRO	Public Record Office (The National Archives)
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
UN(O)	United Nations (Organisation)
USPG	United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel