The Empire Project

The British Empire, wrote Adam Smith, 'has hitherto been not an empire, but the project of an empire' and John Darwin offers a magisterial global history of the rise and fall of that great imperial project. The British Empire, he argues, was much more than a group of colonies ruled over by a scattering of British expatriates until eventual independence. It was, above all, a global phenomenon. Its power derived rather less from the assertion of imperial authority than from the fusing together of three different kinds of empire: the settler empire of the 'white dominions'; the commercial empire of the City of London; and 'Greater India' which contributed markets, manpower and military muscle. This unprecedented history charts how this intricate imperial web was first strengthened, then weakened and finally severed on the rollercoaster of global economic, political and geostrategic upheaval on which it rode from beginning to end.

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THE EMPIRE PROJECT

The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970

John Darwin

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IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER, G. M. DARWIN

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The British Empire, wrote Adam Smith in 1776, 'has hitherto been not an empire, but the project of an empire; not a gold mine but the project of a gold mine'.[1] A hundred years later, his condemnation might have softened. But, viewed as a political or administrative entity, British imperialism remained just such a project: unfinished, untidy, a mass of contradictions, aspirations and anomalies. Defined as the exercise of *sovereign* power, or the unfettered enjoyment of imperial *rule* (the criteria still favoured by many historians), the British Empire in its heyday was largely a sham. Over much that was most commercially or strategically valuable, it could claim no authority; over much that was useless, its hold was complete. Of the half-dozen states whose loyalty was most vital to British world power in 1914, only one could be given direct orders from London.

Partly for this reason, I have preferred the term 'British world-system' to the conventional 'Empire'. The term was given authority by the shrewdest historian of modern British imperialism.[2] It is also meant to convey (the real theme of the book) that British imperialism was a global phenomenon; that its fortunes were governed by global conditions; and that its power in the world derived rather less from the assertion of imperial authority than from the fusing together of several disparate elements. Amid the colossal expansion of scholarly work on the history of empire, it has been easy to lose sight of the geopolitical facts on which its cohesion depended. I have tried in this book to restore this imbalance but not by reviving the old view from the centre. Instead, I have set out to show how the intricate web of 'British connections' linking Britain to India, to its huge empire of commerce, and to the 'white dominions' – the great auxiliary engines of British world power – was first strengthened, then weakened and

finally severed under the stress of geopolitical change. The 'imperial politics' of the British world-system were made and remade by the rollercoaster of economic, political and geostrategic upheaval on which it was tossed from beginning (1830) to end (1970).

In writing this book, I have drawn very heavily on four different traditions in the history of empire. It would be hard to think clearly about British imperialism as a global phenomenon without the extraordinary insights of its greatest modern historians, John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson. In a single short essay, they established once and for all that, despite its many disguises, British imperialism was both global in reach and systemic in structure. It could not be seen as a mere accumulation of colonies; nor could *their* histories make sense on their own. 'Imperialism' in fact was a very flexible force, adapting its method to the time and the place: 'formal' in some places, less formal in others, and at times scarcely visible.[3] I have also relied on what is sometimes regarded as a quite different account of British imperialism, as the instrument of the 'gentlemanly capitalism' evoked by Peter Cain and Tony Hopkins. As I have argued elsewhere, it is easy to exaggerate the historiographical gap.[4] But the crucial contribution that Cain and Hopkins have made is to draw our attention to the massive importance of the City's commercial *imperium* for British power in the world, to its astonishing growth in the late nineteenth century (an age of British decline in many accounts), and to the influence and autonomy that the City enjoyed until its virtual liquidation in the Second World War. Thirdly, I have tried to exploit the insights and ideas of a more recent departure: the attention being given to the socio-cultural attachment between people in Britain and their 'diasporic' relations. 'British World' history has begun to reverse the long neglect suffered by the settler societies in the wider history of empire. It has also helped to restore a long-forgotten perspective of vital importance: the passionate identification of Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Newfoundlanders and South African 'English' with an idealised 'Britishness'; and their common devotion to 'Empire' as its political form.[5] Finally, a far older tradition retains much of its value to the historian of empire and the British world-system. The dangers British leaders most feared to their system's stability came from a breakdown in great power relations, a descent into war or the threat of invasion from Europe. That meant that they paid almost obsessive attention to the diplomatic reports of their envoys abroad, and were sometimes easily swayed by alarming accounts of naval and military

weakness. In the intricate detail of naval, diplomatic and military history we may find some of the best clues to the British system's success – and its catastrophic collapse.

This book has been a long time in the writing and I have incurred many debts in the course of its making. Nuffield College provides the ideal combination of stimulus and support to its Fellows: there could be no better place in which to undertake an extended programme of academic research. I have been exceptionally fortunate in my colleagues in imperial and global history in Oxford – Judith Brown, David Washbrook, Georg Deutsch and Peter Carey – from whom I have learnt an enormous amount. The experience of teaching so many talented students has been a constant goad to reframe my ideas. For more than twenty years, a cohort of doctoral students has struggled to remedy my ignorance of their fields. I am grateful to them and hope their verdict will be: 'making some progress'. I am especially grateful to the founding fathers of the 'British World' initiative – James Belich, Carl Bridge, Phillip Buckner and Robert Holland – for widening my horizons at a critical time; and to Patrick O'Brien's 'Global Economic History Network', which taught me a great deal. Needless to say, the errors and omissions are mine alone.

A special word is needed here about the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, published in five volumes in 1999–2000. There is no doubt that the appearance of these volumes, spanning the whole history of the Empire from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, was a critical moment in the revival of British imperial history from what had seemed at times an almost terminal decline. All those of us who write (and especially teach) in this field owe a great debt to the editorial team of the series, but most of all to its driving force, William Roger Louis.

The task of writing the book would not have been possible without the librarians and archivists in Britain and abroad on whose kindness and efficiency I have depended so much. Two successive history editors at Cambridge University Press, William Davies and Michael Watson, have combined extraordinary patience with warm encouragement, and proffered shrewd advice. I am most grateful to them. Finally, my family have endured my preoccupation with a task that seemed at times to stretch into eternity: perhaps its completion will come as a welcome surprise!