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The middle decades of the twentieth century witnessed the great dramas of the end of Western Imperial rule in Africa and Asia. A series of nationalist onslaughts was launched against the British Empire and these greatly reshaped the modern world. Professor Anthony Low has for many years studied the end of the British Empire and its aftermath. This volume brings together for the first time many of his major essays on the subject, particularly those on India and Africa.

Professor Low emphasizes that the end of the British Empire was only part of the story of decolonisation. Other empires were also brought to an end. In the course of this process, and long through the aftermath, Asian and African societies set about creating new socio-political orders for their countries. Moreover, as the author demonstrates, twentieth-century transformations in the relations between ex-colonial countries and their ex-imperial rulers were by no means confined to Asia and Africa. They extended to the Commonwealth at large.

This is the first volume to explore the political ramifications of the entire twentieth-century process of decolonisation in so comprehensive a manner. It will be read by students and specialists of the Empire and Commonwealth, twentieth-century political history and Asian, African and Australian studies.

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D. A. LOW
*Smuts Professor of the
History of the British Commonwealth, and
President, Clare Hall, Cambridge*



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For
Belle
– who was always there

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Preface

In the middle and later decades of the twentieth century the great western colonial empires in Asia and Africa finally came to an end. That constituted one of the major developments in the history of the world in the twentieth century, and in quite countless ways has reshaped the world in which we live. It played a major part in establishing a quite new international system. It led to the creation of a large number of new orders in which the greater part of humanity now lives. Whereas during the first half of the twentieth century half a dozen or so western empires had dominated large parts of the globe, these now came to be replaced by 100 or so newly independent states, each with many of its own distinctive characteristics. That is a huge change in circumstance.

This volume brings together a number of previously dispersed attempts to grapple with some of the large number of issues which arise. The rise and fall of empires has long provoked a great deal of interest, and a number of far-flung comparisons could readily be offered. But for the most part the chapters which follow do not deal with these. There is nothing about the end of the Roman, the Carolingian, the Inca, the Ming, the Spanish, the Ottoman or the Soviet empires. The concern is principally, though not exclusively, with the passing of the British Empire in South Asia and in Africa. It is still probably too soon to try to encompass the whole of this story in a single volume, and certainly no attempt is made here to provide a sustained, textbook account of the demise of the British Empire, least of all as seen principally through the eyes of its British metropolitan participants. Some of the necessary outline will be found, however, for South Asia in chapter 3, and for Africa in chapter 9.

By contrast with a number of already published surveys, some fairly regular attempts are made in a number of the chapters that follow to set the story of the eclipse of the British Empire in the twentieth century in a wider,

more comparative, contemporary context. Moreover, the focus of this collection is not delimited by the transfer of power. It is as much concerned with the aftermath of the end-of-empire as with the run up to that. Thus, whilst eight chapters are concerned with the processes of decolonisation as such, eight relate to various aspects of the sequel, and several bridge the conventional divide between these. Although the focus is mainly upon political matters, it is hoped that enough attention is paid to other aspects so as to provide a sufficiently illuminating perspective upon the large variety of angles of vision, lines of thought, and differing approaches which are worth pursuing.

For the most part the chapters that follow will speak for themselves. Perhaps, however, a selection of the points which they make may be emphasised here.

There are considerable limitations, as it seems to me, in accounts of end-of-empire which take as their continuing theme the evolution of the colonial policy and decisions of any one colonial power. These were certainly of great importance (and I have written my own essay along these lines in a chapter on 'Sequence in the Demission of Power' in my *Lion Rampant. Essays in the Study of British Imperialism* (London, 1974). But colonial powers were rarely their own masters (not least in their own colonial territories) as such accounts tend to assume, and a really illuminating account needs to take note of the marked differences in the nature and sequence of the policies and reactions of the different colonial powers.

The idea that the end-of-empire is principally to be explained by the colonial power's progressive loss of colonial collaborators also seems to me questionable. Collaborators were never more than one of the supports of imperial authority. They rarely defected extensively (there would have been far more collapses of regimes if they had). All manner of other factors were at least as important.

I have qualms, too, with those accounts of the processes of decolonisation which simply provide a checklist of varying explanations without attempting to relate these to one another. Decolonisation (so it will be argued here) all but invariably required first the growth of nationalist sentiments and nationalist forces within a colonial territory itself. But this growth alone was never the whole story. Whilst in reality international aspects were rarely of great significance, what was then of prime importance were the particularities of the imperial response, which to a major degree determined the nature of the confrontation which then ensued – though hardly ever the eventual outcome.

It should then be noted that whilst nationalist forces in Asia were for the most part mobilised centrally, ordinarily this was far from being the case in Africa. Yet one should not conclude from this that Africa's nationalisms presented a much lesser challenge. For that would be to overlook the often

crucial fact that disaggregated forces could be at least as potent a threat to imperial control as aggregated ones.

Half a dozen chapters in this collection consider a selection of those issues which remained for the various ex-colonial countries to confront after independence. None of these countries was a *tabula rasa*. They all carried significant parts of their colonial pasts with them. Yet, of course, they then worked out their own variations and departures from these extensively.

The last two chapters then serve to signify (they cannot do more than this) that in the later years of the twentieth century these issues confronted not only the South Asian and African countries which were once incorporated in the British Empire, but also Britain itself, the Commonwealth (which rather hamhandedly Britain sought to turn into a buttress for its now changed position in the world), and not least countries of the 'older' Commonwealth, such as Australia. It is worth emphasising that the ramifications of the empire's eclipse in every part of the once British Empire have been far more extensive than is generally appreciated.

And one last word here. There is a tendency in some quarters in Britain to view the end-of-empire almost wholly as a concomitant of the decline of Britain's former position as a great power. That not only smacks of nostalgic myopia. It can be very false to the profound sense of positive achievement, not simply of so many citizens of the former colonial territories themselves, but of a great many British actors too – from Edwin Montagu, the later Arthur Balfour, Ramsey Macdonald, Lord Lothian, Clement Attlee, Stafford Cripps, Oliver Stanley, Mountbatten, through to Creech-Jones, Malcolm Macdonald, Andrew Cohen, Hugh Foot, Iain Macleod, Ernest Vasey and so many other individuals too. For my own part I can think in this connection of a number of my contemporaries – Lalage Bown, Michael Crowder, Terry Ranger, Cherry Gertzel, Colin Leys, Tommy Gee, Cran Pratt, Nigel Oram, Mike Faber, Aidan Southall, Michael McWilliam to name just a few (if they will forgive me for so doing). I am aware that there is an old division here that goes back for a century and more. At the very least it should be allowed that this much more positive sense of direction lasted right through to the end of empire and beyond.

The first chapter serves as an introduction to the whole collection. It reproduces my inaugural lecture as Smuts Professor of the History of the British Commonwealth in the University of Cambridge, delivered in 1984, which the Cambridge University Press published in a small booklet in 1985. I toyed with the idea of stripping this of its personal references and its lecture format. That, however, would have entailed a much larger revision than soon began to seem warranted. Apart, therefore, from some corrections and the insertion (in square brackets) of a paragraph in support of a central argument which is based upon material that has only become available since 1984, the text as delivered is here produced unchanged.

Since it announces many of the themes that are later pursued there are inevitably some repetitions in subsequent chapters. It is to be hoped that these will not be too obtrusive.

The second chapter, on the twentieth century revolutions in Monsoon Asia, began life as part of the Conference Lecture on the occasion of the 1st National Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Melbourne in 1976. The present version has been put together from various passages in my chapter on 'The Asian Mirror to Tropical Africa's Independence' in *The Transfer of Power in Africa. Decolonisation, 1940–1960*, ed. Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis (Yale University Press, 1982); from my 'Sequence, Crux and Means: Some Asian Nationalisms Compared', in *Asia – The Winning of Independence*, ed. Robin Jeffrey (Macmillan 1981); and more especially from 'The Asian Revolutions of the Mid Twentieth Century', in *Transfer and Transformation: Political Institutions in the New Commonwealth. Essays in Honour of W.H. Morris-Jones*, ed. Peter Lyon and James Manor (Leicester University Press, 1983). I am grateful to all three publishers for the opportunity to rework these here.

The third chapter appeared originally as the introduction to *Congress and the Raj. Facets of the Indian Struggle 1917–47*, which I edited and which Heinemann Educational Books and Arnold Heinemann Delhi published in 1977. As it seems to continue to have value as a very general statement it seemed worth reproducing, and I am grateful to both publishers for permission to do so. The fourth chapter on 'the Forgotten Bania' was presented as a paper at a conference on the centenary of the Indian National Congress in 1985 which was jointly sponsored by the Centre of Indian Studies of the University of Oxford and the Centre of South Asian Studies of the University of Cambridge. It is reproduced by permission of the Oxford University Press Delhi who in 1988 published it in the conference volume which I edited called *The Indian National Congress. Centenary Hindsight*. It emphasises a further theme which is somewhat underplayed in chapter three.

Chapter 5 – 'Counterpart experiences: India/Indonesia 1920s–1950s' – began as a contribution to the first of a series of four conferences on comparative modern Indian and Indonesian history which were jointly conducted in the mid 1980s by historians from the Centre for the History of European Expansion at Leiden University, the Delhi School of Economics, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, and the Centre of South Asian Studies in the University of Cambridge. It is reproduced by permission of the editors of *Itinerario* where it first appeared in their Special Issue on 'India and Indonesia the 1920s to the 1950s; The Origins of Planning', 10 no. 1 (1986), 117–43. Chapter 6, 'Emergencies and Elections in India', was delivered as my Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture in the University of Cambridge in 1980. It appears here by permission of Macmillans who in

1986 published it in *Studies in British Imperial History. Essays in Honour of A.P. Thornton*, ed. Gordon Martel. Once again I trust it is none the worse for appearing here in its original lecture form.

With chapter 7 this collection turns to Africa. That chapter first appeared as the Introduction to *History of East Africa*, volume III, ed. D.A. Low and Alison Smith (Clarendon Press, 1976), which is now out of print. I am especially grateful to my co-author, Dr John Lonsdale, for his readiness to see it reproduced here, and to Oxford University Press for their permission to do so. Chapter 8 is the oldest of the items reprinted here. It was written *in medias res* in 1960 and was originally published as 'The Colonial Demise in Africa' in *Australian Outlook*, 14 no. 2 (1960), 257–68. Since I have not encountered a comparable compilation elsewhere on the torrent of events in Africa in 1960 I hope its reproduction here will be of some value. After all these years I have changed a tense here and a phrase there. I am grateful to the present editor of *Australian Outlook* for agreeing to its reprinting.

Chapter 9 surveys the demise of the British Empire in Africa over a rather longer time-span. It reproduces the chapter I wrote for *Decolonisation and African Independence: The Transfers of Power 1960–1980*, ed. Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis (Yale University Press, 1988), and I am much indebted to the publishers for enabling me to include it here. Chapter 10, on 'History and independent Africa's political trauma', is new. It derives from lectures and seminars I have given at the Royal College of Defence Studies, to the Defence Studies Group in Cambridge, and at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. Chapter 11, on 'Political superstructures in post-colonial states', is based in part upon my chapter on 'Congress and India's Body Politic', in *The Indian National Congress and the Political Economy of India 1885–1985*, ed. Mike Sheppardson and Colin Simmons (Avebury, 1988), and more particularly on the chapter I wrote for *Uganda Now. Between Decay and Development*, ed. Holgar Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle, which James Currey published in 1988. I am grateful to both publishers for their agreement to draw extensively upon them here.

Chapter 12 began as a public lecture on 'Little Britain and Large Commonwealth' on the occasion of the opening of the Centre of Commonwealth Studies at the University of Stirling in 1985. In that form it was published in *The Round Table*, 298 (1986), 109–21. I am grateful to the editor for permission to adapt it here, and to Dr John McCracken, the Director of the Stirling Centre, for his kind invitation to speak on that occasion.

The final chapter, called 'Australia in the eastern hemisphere', started as Presidential Addresses to the Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia at Monash University in May 1982, and to the British Australian Studies Association at the University of Warwick in

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Preface

1986. As will be clear, it has been substantially enlarged since then.

As other people have found, my debts to others are a great deal more numerous than I can at all readily specify. I am especially indebted to those in the Australian National University and in the University of Cambridge who over the last two decades have provided me with so much stimulus. I hope all those many others who have been good enough to provide their ever generous assistance will accept my warm thanks as well.

D. A. Low
Clare Hall, Cambridge