



Muriel E. Chamberlain. *The Longman Companion to European Decolonisation in the Twentieth Century.* London and New York: Longman, 1998. viii + 352 pp. \$40.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-07773-7; \$95.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-07774-4.



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The Companion as False Friend

At first glance, this book seems like an answer to the prayers of whoever has needed a handy source of information about the post-Second World War demise of European overseas empire. The publisher's promotional blurb on the rear cover claims that "one comprehensive volume" brings together "all the essential facts and figures relating to the process of European decolonisation in the twentieth century," and that it is "a formidable achievement," and "an essential reference tool, for those studying, and teaching, decolonisation, imperialism, and world history in general."

One is reminded of the Houghton-Mifflin *Encyclopedia of World History*, revised several times by the Harvard historian William Langer, among others, and expects, given this build-up, a volume of similar quality and comprehensiveness on the history of colonial rule and decolonization. Far from it—the results of Professor Chamberlain's efforts are very disappointing. On one hand, her "companion" to European decolonization is unbalanced and uneven. It stresses the British Empire and its successor states, provides some information about the French counterpart, but gives only a minimum of information

about the other empires (Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Belgian, and Italian) and their devolution. On the other hand, it is replete with inconsistencies and errors of various kinds, particularly with regard to the French empire and its successor states.

Since the "companion" designation of this publication destins it to be used primarily as a reference work, it provides more-or-less raw information. A first section, "The World in 1945," consists of four parts. Part One lists all the European overseas possessions at the end of the Second World War, ordered according to the country to which they belonged and to status (dominion, in the case of Great Britain, colony, protectorate, and "special case"), area, and population size. Part Two introduces the League of Nations Mandate system. It briefly describes the different categories (A, B, and C) of mandated territories. Part Three outlines the key events in the "colonial" theaters of the Second World War. Part Four describes the trusteeship system of the United Nations Organization for the administration of dependent territories, these having been primarily the remaining League of Nations mandates transformed into trust territories to

which were added two former Italian colonies. Included here are excerpts from the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (1948), the “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples” (1960), and the “International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid” (1973).

Section Two, “Metropolitan Politics,” consists mainly of lists of the political leaders of the colonial powers: heads of state and prime ministers, and in the case of Great Britain, the Secretaries of State for India and the Colonial Secretaries, as of 1916, and the Dominion Secretaries, as of 1925. In the case of France, the author additionally gives short descriptions of the shifts from the Third to the Fourth and then to the Fifth Republic along with a nod at the Vichy regime and the Free French.

These first two sections are relatively short, thirty-six pages in all. The next two sections—Three, “The Chronology of Decolonisation”, and Four, “Biographies”—make up the bulk of the book, altogether 238 pages.

The author wrote Section Three in an outline form similar to that of many review manuals for the Western Civilization courses taught in American universities. It covers the rise and fall of European rule overseas and is ordered by colonial power and by region. The section includes very short descriptions of the varying philosophies of colonial domination (*i.e.*, indirect rule and dyarchy in the case of the British; assimilation and association, in the case of the French).

Section Four, in some ways the only really interesting (if flawed) part of the book, consists of 235 short biographical sketches of a medley of metropolitan officials and politicians, colonial functionaries, and nationalist leaders of the countries concerned, along with a few odd American and South African personages linked one way or another to decolonization and to the struggle for and against apartheid. The latter represent the author’s attempt to link the opposition to white supremacy in South Africa (independent since 1910) to decolonization in general.

Then comes the “Glossary” (Section Five) listing and defining a medley of 256 terms, names of political parties, concepts, acronyms, and the like. Most of the definitions are minimal.

Section Six consists of a bibliographical essay that is limited almost exclusively to English-language works. It thus emphasizes the British empire and its successor states and by default neglects the other empires and de-

volved states. Finally, Appendix 1 lists the dates of independence of (only) the African nations, and Appendix 2, name changes in cases in which the independent state (regardless of region) is named differently from the former colony or has changed its name at a later date. Here, although the shift from “Ceylon” to “Sri Lanka” is duly noted, that from “Burma” to “Myanmar” is not.

Looking particularly at Sections Three and Four, the most substantive parts of this book, one notes that the portion on the chronology of British decolonization is 109 pages long as compared to thirty-three pages for French decolonization. There are over sixty biographical entries for metropolitan British subjects who were linked one way or another to the empire/commonwealth and over seventy entries for indigenous personages who were active in the British territories (Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Gandhi, Nmandi Asikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah) as compared to nine entries for metropolitan Frenchmen (three presidents including Charles de Gaulle), and sixty-two indigenous personages in the French sphere including Houari Boumedienne, Leopold Senghor, and Ho Chi Minh.

The other colonial countries get very skimpy treatment. For instance, four pages in the “Chronology” are devoted mostly to Indonesia, but the “Biographies” mention only two Indonesian nationalists: Ahmed Sukarno and Mohamed Suharto. There are no biographical entries for any Dutch officials nor any attempt in the Chronology to detail any of the steps that the Netherlands began to take as early as the 1930’s to increase local autonomy in the East Indies.

Even though the British and French empires get most of the attention in this book, one cannot help but note that Chamberlain has emphasized certain regions and colonies in the British and French spheres over others. In the case of the former British possessions, she gives great weight to the Indian subcontinent as well as to tropical Africa. Although she also devotes much attention to the Palestine mandate, on one hand, and to the British sphere of influence in Persia/Iran, on the other, she says almost nothing about Kuwait. The name appears only once, on page 7, under the rubric, “Special Cases,” Kuwait having been one of a number of small Persian Gulf states that had special treaty relationships with Great Britain. Yet many of the problems between Kuwait and Iraq today can be traced back to British policies in Iraq at the start of the British Mesopotamian/Iraqi mandate, particularly the setting of the borders separating Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. It was the desire of the British government and

particularly of its High Commissioner in Iraq, Sir Percy Cox (1920-1923), to leave Iraq with as little coastline as possible, while favoring Kuwait, that contributed to the later hostilities between Iraq and Kuwait.

The fact that this book makes no mention of Cox is a reminder of the inconsistency in the way that Chamberlain has chosen the names to be included in the "Biographies." One notes, in regard to another colonial theater, that she has listed the two final British governors of colonial Tanganyika, Edward Twining and Richard Turnbull, but not an earlier but equally important governor, Sir Donald Cameron (1926-1931), important for his attempts to apply indirect rule. Or, for instance, in a fairly good account of the political awakening of the Kikuyu people of Kenya that mentions Eliud Mathu, the first African to be appointed to the Kenya Legislative Council and then to the Executive Council, one notes that Chamberlain does not mention Harry Thuku who founded the Young Kikuyu Association (that she does mention and briefly describes).

The sections of the book dealing with French decolonization are similarly uneven. North and Sub-Saharan Africa get fuller treatment than do Indo-China. No mention is made either of the leased territory of Kwangchow near Hainan Island in China, that was governed as part of Indo-China until the Second World War, or of the French concessions that used to exist in China, particularly in Shanghai. Likewise, no mention is made of certain unoccupied islands that still belong to France: Kerguelen, Saint-Paul, Crozet, and Amsterdam near Antarctica, Clipperton Island, off the Pacific coast of Mexico, as well as Terre Adelaide on Antarctica.

Just as disconcerting as the unevenness of treatment is the number of small errors that appear throughout much of this book, particularly in those parts dealing with the former French possessions. For instance, on page 161 in the chronology of the Algerian Revolution, Chamberlain informs the reader that Ferhat Abbas was one of the "historic chiefs" of the Algerian revolution, even though he did not rally to the cause until April 1956 when he and a number of middle class Algerians went over to the FLN. Twice, on page 154 and 301, Chamberlain mistakenly lists the father of Tunisian independence, Habib Bourguiba, as being named "Henri" Bourguiba. In the latter's biographical entry, she claims (p. 215) that he

stepped down as President of Tunisia in 1969. In fact, he remained President until the late 1980's when, because he had become a bit senile, he was deposed by his prime minister, Ben Ali. Finally, Chamberlain lists Ahmed Ben Bella (p. 212), who really was one of the historic chiefs of the Algerian revolution and the first head of state of independent Algeria, as having died in 1998. At the moment of writing, he is very much alive and busy attempting yet another political come-back.

Even in regard to the British Empire Chamberlain has made a few slips. For instance, she includes the mainland possessions of British Guiana and British Honduras under the heading, "Achievement of independence by individual islands" (p. 111).

The "Bibliography," that is already very sparse so far as specific works on specific colonies are concerned, includes a similar sort of error. Only two books are listed for "The Spanish Empire," neither one dealing with Equatorial Guinea. On the other hand, R. Fegley's, *Equatorial Guinea: An African Tragedy* (1989) is listed under the heading, "The Portuguese Empire."

Of what real use is such a book? An advanced student or a seasoned researcher wishing to use it to check a fact or a name in an area of imperial or post-colonial history in which he or she might not be very knowledgeable would probably be disappointed. On one hand, he or she would probably not find the desired information. On the other hand, the search would reveal how badly other areas about which he or she might have detailed knowledge are treated. A beginner would run the risk of being misled by the various errors strewn throughout the book or of being confused by the presentation. Under the best of circumstances, he or she would learn very little about the Dutch, Portuguese, Belgian, and Italian possessions and their decolonization.

Nevertheless, the idea of producing a "companion" or a handbook of this sort on colonial history and decolonization is very good. We regret that Professor Chamberlain was unable to rise to the occasion.

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