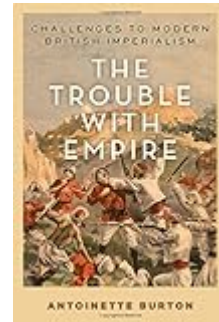


Antoinette Burton. *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 336 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-993660-1.



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From the early days of the modern British Empire in the middle of the eighteenth century, there were always those who wondered whether empire was worth the trouble. It was feared that the enterprise would prove financially ruinous, militarily unsustainable, politically divisive, and morally corrupting. Empire was never seen simply as a triumphal progress. And, in the long run at least, the pessimists were right. British imperial power foundered on the world wars of the twentieth century, which themselves were a consequence of two hundred years of imperial enterprise. Yet the fragilities of empire have not been a major theme of historical analysis. Antoinette Burton's new book seeks to change all that.

The Trouble with Empire is a catalogue of the inability of the British Empire to effectively exercise its dominion. For the most part Burton draws her examples of imperial faltering and failings from India and Africa. An introduction lays out the main lines of argument of the book and this is followed by three long chapters covering a wide range of subjects, from military expeditions to economic and labor protest and insurgencies. She begins with the military history of the empire on the North-West Frontier of India as an example of the difficulty of securing military power. She shows how the British could only

maintain their imperial presence in that part of the world through continual war. They were never able to decisively defeat the Pathans; nor could they pacify the countryside; nor were they ever safe in their forts and cantonments. This frontier required ceaseless military patrols, and death and assassination of British officials were continual risks.

Such military vulnerability was true elsewhere. In empire a final military victory was an elusive feat. The problem was that the British were not usually fighting organized states. When they did—as in eighteenth-century India—they could bring conflict to a definitive conclusion. But most of the time they were fighting indigenous peoples in loosely ordered political groupings to whom surrender did not mean defeat. So although the British often chose to regard a particular engagement as a victory, it was frequently nothing of the sort. Military personnel on the ground were aware of this. For her account of the fragile military situation on the North-West Frontier, Burton relies heavily upon a close reading of Winston Churchill's *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*. Burton is struck by the way Churchill's description of pacification on the North-West Frontier is hardly a document of imperial triumphalism. It is more a recognition of the un-

certainties of imperial power. Of course, imperial hegemony existed more in the minds of writers about empire than in those of intelligent practitioners of empire, like Churchill, who tended to be more impressed with its fragilities. So, the British never defeated the Pathans—or the Maori, for that matter—in the sense that the French were defeated in 1815. But the interpretation of such conflict in metropolitan culture demanded that they be imagined as victories. And, in the final analysis, they could be so regarded if the British were not displaced—as, of course, they were not. The military narrative of empire is one of defeat within victory, because victory was never final, but neither was defeat. Even when those opposed to British rule were subdued, they lived to fight another day by switching from martial weapons to more subtle political strategies, as the stories of the Maori, the Xhosa, and the Zulu all attest.

When she turns her attention to internal unrest, Burton finds the same kind of instability and failure of the British to close the deal on their rule. Governance of native peoples was a continual challenge for the British. Economic troubles and labor protest could easily morph into political protest—as, indeed, the origins of Gandhi's campaign in India illustrated. The labor movements that emerged in the interwar years were all politically charged, and in some places such as West Africa and the West Indies led directly into movements of political nationalism.

Governance was challenged also by the persistence of insurrection and insurgency. The famous revolt of 1857 in India, of course, has always served as the centerpiece of revolt in empire. Burton is anxious to insist that 1857 was less a special event and more just one episode in an ongoing series of insurrections from Ireland to India. But this particular argument is weakened by a tendency to lump all kinds of civil unrest into the category of insurrection. Whilst it is clear that 1857 was an insurrection, the various boycott movements in India, for example, or the Jamaica riots of 1865 do not necessarily fall into that category. They were certainly more complex than is allowed here. There was no necessary straight line between the rural protest in Ireland and the Irish Republic of 1922.

Likewise, when we turn to the events of the scramble for Africa in the 1880s, the argument begins to falter. Burton would like to see the scramble for Africa as a response to gathering challenges to imperial rule. A prime example is offered of the Sudan in the 1880s,

which Burton treats as a case of insurgency against empire. But the fit is not a good one, and Burton rather mangles the story and the chronology. Until the conquest of the Sudan by Kitchener in 1898, British involvement in the country remained distant. As is well known, it was only with deep reluctance that General Charles Gordon was sent to Khartoum in 1884. Nor was he sent by Gladstone to reconquer the country, as Burton seems to believe. This had already been tried by an Egyptian army led by Colonel Hicks Pasha, which had been slaughtered in the effort. Gordon's remit was to evacuate the Khartoum garrison and to leave the country to the Mahdi. It would seem that Burton has confused this episode with Gordon's earlier sojourn in the Sudan at the end of the 1870s, when he served the khedive of Egypt as governor and spent a lot of time combating the slave trade. The chronology of the Mahdist movement is also misstated.

This particular example leads one to wonder if the book was put together in haste. In addition to this kind of factual confusion, the conceptual framework of the book tends towards oversimplification. Leaving aside the white settler colonies, which do not fit well into her frame of reference, *trouble* is not an untroubled category to explain imperial rule in the indigenous empire. Thus, in the introduction, and then again in the epilogue, Burton makes the case that a history of empire organized around *failure* and *trouble* is more convincing than a narrative that follows imperial *rise* and *fall*. Yet this is surely a false dichotomy; the one does not deny the other. It is true that empire was rent with tensions and fault lines. But to set the empire project up as a series of binaries and to describe those tensions as stark alternatives—victory or defeat, insurgency versus governance—conceals more than it explains. Trouble in empire was a lot more intricate than Burton conveys.

How British rule over indigenous peoples was secured was always a complicated, subtle, and messy business. The best that generally could be managed was *dominance without hegemony*, to use Ranajit Guha's famous formulation. But dominance without hegemony was gained through ongoing sets of negotiations that sought as much stability as could be secured in an inherently uncertain situation. Instability—or *trouble*—in society is a universal societal counterpart to stability. It does not necessarily challenge or contradict stable rule. It may, in fact, reinforce elite power, by serving to call paternal rulers to their duty. There are strong hints of this pattern in empire. Thus, the long lines of indigenous peoples traipsing off to London to appeal to the queen for

fairer treatment against the colonial government. There were many ways imperial systems of rule maintained the balance between the tensions that threatened stability. Military power was usually the last resort. More common was to seek the loyalty of at least a segment of the subaltern classes themselves. This was true everywhere in the empire. Mohandas Gandhi had no intention of taking India out of the British Empire when he started his political career in South Africa, and this remained true for many years thereafter. If India was—as Burton suggests—a place of continual contestation, it was also a place of continual cooperation. Both were important. The Raj would not have been possible without the collaboration of Indians at all social levels in the project. Nor indeed would the

empire itself, which to one degree or another was actually run by the very people it ruled.

These are matters that we can argue about. The book, nevertheless, identifies a real historical problem. The multiple tensions that characterized the empire are thoroughly familiar to historians who work in the local archives of empire. But they are only now beginning to be taken seriously by imperial historians. How to integrate them into a history of empire is a challenging and important task. Antoinette Burton has taken a first shot at how we may do this from an imperial history perspective, and for that we should be thankful.

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