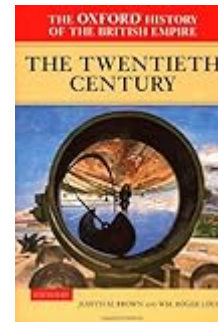


Judith Brown, William Roger Louis, eds. *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xxvi + 773 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820564-7.



Reviewed by Mary A. Procida (Department of History, Temple University)

Published on H-Albion (May, 2001)

Gone With the Winds of Change?

Gone With the Winds of Change?

Is the present moment a propitious time for a major reassessment of the history of the British Empire? The Empire today is much reduced from its zenith, when Britain ruled a quarter of the world's surface, to a handful of islands scattered across the globe. Britain turned over its last important colonial possession, Hong Kong, to China in 1997. Although Britain fought a colonial war with Argentina over the Falklands in 1982, the encounter would have been farcical but for the tragic loss of life on both sides. Indeed the United Kingdom itself may even be heading towards dissolution, as Scotland and Wales achieve greater measures of political independence from Westminster. Clearly, Oxford University Press, which has just published a five-volume *History of the British Empire* (four volumes of history and a fifth on the historiography of the Empire), believes the time is ripe for a major reappraisal of British imperialism.

Wm. Roger Louis, the general editor of the series and co-editor, with Judith M. Brown, of *Volume IV: The Twentieth Century* (reviewed here), explains the timeliness of this undertaking in his "Foreword" to that volume:

"Although the subject remains ideologically charged, the passions aroused by British imperialism have so lessened that we are now better placed than ever before to see the course of the Empire steadily and to see it whole" (p. vii). It is only now that the Empire is dead and gone, Louis implies, that we can study it with any—dare I say it—objectivity. Certainly the rapid progress of decolonization that has marked the half century since the final installment of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, the last comparable overview of the Empire, as well as historian's many new insights into the processes of imperialism warrant a fresh look at the Empire. Volume IV succeeds admirably in presenting the "big picture" of the history of the British Empire during the incredibly turbulent period of the twentieth century. It is less successful, however, in incorporating many of the new theoretical approaches to imperialism that have made the study of the British Empire a particularly exciting field for historians in recent years. Despite Louis's claims to objectivity, the Empire can still arouse fierce passions, even among historians.

Volume IV, like its companion volumes in the Ox-

ford series, is first and foremost an invaluable tool for research. Thirty of the thirty-one articles (the exception being Judith M. Brown's "Epilogue" on the aftermath of Empire) include excellent basic bibliographies on their topics, along with useful footnotes that often include additional references. This volume should clearly be the starting point for research in twentieth-century imperial history. A sizable index and a detailed timeline, divided both chronologically and geographically, make the book useful for quick references, as well.

This is not to imply that the volume should function only as a jumping-off point for further research, one of those books in which the reader skims quickly over the text only to peruse the bibliography intensively. All of the articles, which generally range in length from twenty to thirty pages, are eminently readable. Although the book develops themes raised in the preceding volume of the series, which covers the nineteenth century, it also stands on its own. It is a testament to the authors' skills as historians and writers that they manage to provide sufficient background information to make their own essays comprehensible to anyone lacking an extensive grounding in British history, although the novice would be well-served by reading Wm. Roger Louis's excellent introductory chapter. Because of the comprehensive nature of the volume, the editors were obviously compelled to limit the coverage allocated to any single aspect of twentieth-century imperial history, and some of the pieces move at a rather breathless pace through their particular topic. Although space constraints prevented authors from providing an in-depth analysis of specific issues in their respective fields, the authors nonetheless flag many of the important issues for readers who can then, of course, pursue these questions further, guided by the bibliographic suggestions.

Substantively, the volume adopts a two-pronged approach to the subject matter to provide the most comprehensive coverage of this complex topic. Following Louis's introduction, which sets forth many of the important issues in the historiography of the British Empire in the twentieth century as well as explaining the approach of the book, the first sixteen essays address various thematic questions. Although some of these are intentionally limited in either their chronological scope (e.g., Ronald Hyam's essay on "The British Empire in the Edwardian Era" or Keith Jeffery's piece on "The Second World War") or their geographic coverage (e.g., Deirdre McMahon's article on "Ireland and the Empire-Commonwealth, 1900-1948"), as a group these pieces address topics that affected many areas of the Empire over

a long period of time. The aim, as Louis explains in the "Foreword," is "to explain how varying conditions in Britain interacted with those in many other parts of the world to create both a constantly changing territorial Empire and ever-shifting patterns of social and economic relations" (p. vii). Some of the pieces are more successful than others in conveying the impression of an Empire united by political, economic, and cultural commonalities. Stephen Constantine's excellent essay on "Migrants and Settlers" successfully delineates the intricate imperial connections wrought by the comings and goings of people around the Empire, while also noting the influence of worldwide demographic shifts. Similarly, taken together, the two pieces on the economics of Empire, D.K. Fieldhouse's "The Metropolitan Economics of Empire" and B.R. Tomlinson's "Imperialism and After: The Economy of the Empire on the Periphery," provide a good sense of the web of trade and finance that linked together the fortunes of Britain and its Empire.

While the first half of the volume thus concentrates on factors unifying the Empire, the second half breaks it down into its component parts, tracing the twentieth-century imperial histories of individual countries and geographic regions. These essays adopt a chronological approach. However, although each has a different starting and closing date, they almost uniformly end with the country under discussion achieving its independence from British rule. Louis rightly renounces the whiggish notion of an imperial history in which the gradual introduction of democratic institutions leads inexorably to the happy outcome of self-government for former colonies. Nonetheless, the "dénouement" of independence, which marks most of these essays, tends to reinforce this impression of historical inevitability. Interestingly, the essays on the white settler dominions, which must necessarily eschew this clear-cut conclusion to the imperial relationship, provide a better sense of the processes of continuity and change, and of the contingencies and ambiguities that shaped the history of the British Empire.

Surprisingly, the essay on Ireland is included in the thematic half of the volume because of its "central importance" to imperial questions in the twentieth century (p. 12). Although Louis identifies the question of Ireland as one of the seven major themes of the book and, indeed, of the series as a whole, the other pieces in the volume do not generally develop this particular thread. If any individual country emerges in this work as particularly significant to the twentieth-century history of the Empire it is India, whose nationalist struggle inspired anti-imperialist movements in other colonies. Conversely,

India's decision to remain in the Commonwealth after 1947 sustained imperial affiliations long after the Empire itself had passed from the scene.

These individual country and regional narratives also emphasize a compartmentalized approach to the history of the Empire, which the thematic essays do not completely dispel. In addition to the question of Ireland, Louis outlines six other themes that are intended not only to link this volume to the other works in the series but that are, presumably, also critical to understanding the British Empire as a whole: "emigration patterns and the consequences for the British economy; the Empire as a field of opportunity for women, and for the Scots, Welsh, and Irish as well as English; missionary activity; champions and critics of British imperialism; British rule in India and Africa and the idea of trusteeship; and the defence of the Empire" (p. 12). While these themes may be more prominent in the other volumes, and although it seems reasonable to assume their historical importance to the twentieth-century Empire, they are not crucial to many of the essays in the volume. Although Louis's attempt to provide a unifying framework is perhaps necessary for a major survey of this type, it nonetheless begs the question implicitly posed by the structure of Volume IV and, more urgently, by the Oxford History of the British Empire as a whole. Can we meaningfully address the British Empire, spreading over more than four hundred years and one-quarter of the world's surface, as a single historical topic or must serious analysis focus on a case-by-case approach? The dualistic structure of the volume is obviously intended to cover all bases, yet the individualized approach of the essays in the second half of the collection nonetheless emerges as the more comprehensive and convincing.

The editors have grappled more explicitly, and perhaps more successfully, with several other important questions in imperial history. In the debate over formal vs. informal Empire, they have come down firmly on the side of the latter. The volume includes individual essays on China and Latin America, and several of the other articles reference this concept, as well. On the question of periodicity, the editors have adopted a pragmatic approach. The series itself is divided on the basis of centuries, which, of course, does not necessarily reflect the processes of historical change. Louis addresses the relative merits of approaching the topic using a long twentieth-century perspective (i.e., starting with the rapid expansion of Empire in Africa and Asia in the late-nineteenth century) and a short twentieth-century view (i.e., commencing after the upheavals of

World War I). Recognizing the historical specificity of different topics and different regions of the Empire, the editors have wisely allowed the authors to choose the time frame best suited to their topic. Thus, while some pieces, such as John W. Cell's interesting essay on "Colonial Rule" and Ronald Hyam's equally informative contribution on "Bureaucracy and Trusteeship" in the Colonial Empire, reference nineteenth century events, others, such as Judith M. Brown's piece on "India" focus mainly on the story after World War I. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this is not only a metropolitan history of Empire. The essays acknowledge the interactive dynamic of Empire, which was particularly important in the twentieth century as colonies and dominions began to assert their independence—politically, culturally, and economically—from the "mother country".

While this distanced approach to the history of the British Empire allows for a sweeping survey of historical events and proves to be the volume's greatest strength, it is also the book's greatest weakness. Louis's claim that the history of the Empire can only be written once the "passions" of empire have subsided is demonstrated perhaps too well. The volume's dispassionate approach to imperialism drains imperial history of its lifeblood.

It is the impersonal forces of history that are at work here. Given the importance to much recent imperial history of literary theory, cultural history, gender theory, and subaltern studies, it is surprising how much of the volume is devoted to traditional diplomatic, military, economic, and political approaches to the study of Empire. Granted, much of the twentieth-century history of the British Empire can be interpreted in terms of the constitutional reforms that reshaped the imperial relationship, along with the economic, military, and diplomatic reversals that dramatically altered Britain's position in the world. Broadly speaking, much of the research on the British Empire in the twentieth century has concerned itself with analyzing these cataclysmic changes, while much of the work on the cultural history of Empire has focused on earlier periods. Nonetheless, if Empire is about anything, it is the story of different peoples coming together in a variety of contexts. These colonial encounters occurred, of course, in the political, financial, and military arenas. But they were also played out over other terrains, including sex, language, education, race, and gender. Those aspects of the imperial encounter are too often absent from the essays in this book.

The few pieces that attack these questions cannot do justice to the vast topics of, for example, culture, gen-

der, and race in the Empire. Nor do most of the other essays integrate these themes into their discussions of other subjects. John M. MacKenzie has provided a comprehensive essay on "The Popular Culture of Empire in Britain." But, as its title indicates, the piece does not, nor is it intended to, address the formation of an imperial culture outside the metropole. A companion piece or two on that topic would have been useful in providing a more comprehensive view of the cultural history of the Empire. Rosalind O'Hanlon's essay on "Gender in the British Empire" does double duty in this volume, addressing questions both of masculinity and femininity, and of subalternity. However, these concepts find their way into few of the other essays. Shula Mark's piece on "Southern Africa" and Howard Johnson's essay on the British Caribbean are, as far as I could make out, the only two to mention the importance of gender. Johnson's is also noteworthy in the centrality of class to his analysis, a concept notably absent from many of the other essays. Even questions of race, although certainly not ignored, are not featured as prominently as might be expected.

Perhaps an even more glaring lack, given this volume's focus on the twentieth century, is the absence of any post-colonial perspective on Britain and its Empire, beyond the excellent, if all too brief, epilogue by Judith M. Brown. Indeed, what this volume seems to have forgotten is that Britain—just as much as India, Ghana, or Vanuatu—was itself a part of the Empire. The question of Empire has been and continues to be a crucial factor in post-imperial British politics and society. In particular, both serious academic works, such as Kathleen Paul's *Whitewashing Britain*, and popular fiction such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* have addressed the ramifications

of the immigration of peoples from the former colonies to post-war Britain.[1] This volume remains, for the most part, silent on those issues.

Several contributors to the volume invoke Harold MacMillan's famous reference to the "winds of change" sweeping through the Empire after World War II. However many changes this hurricane of decolonization stirred up, the legacy of imperialism has certainly not gone with the wind. As Britain has become a more racially, religiously, and ethnically diverse nation, questions raised by its imperial past have become increasingly part of its present. Louis, Brown, and the other contributors to this volume of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* may have been able to distance themselves dispassionately from the Empire, but the legacies of imperialism continue to shape British history and to affect the lives of people around the world. Perhaps in a hundred years or so, we can look forward to a sixth volume in this series, which will deal with these questions by addressing the history of the British Empire in the twenty-first century.

[1]. Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, (New York: Random House, 2000).

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Mary A. Procida. Review of Brown, Judith; Louis, William Roger, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5146>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.