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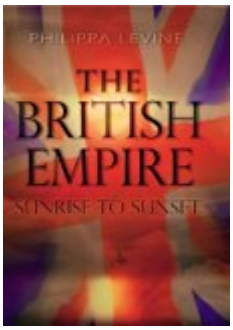
Philippa Levine. *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset.* Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007. x + 252 pp. $32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-47281-5.



Reviewed by Philip Harling

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This is a highly effective overview, clearly designed for widespread classroom adoption and fully deserving of it. In two hundred very readable pages, Philippa Levine manages to tell a vivid and memorable story of the British Empire from the Ulster plantation to the Falklands War, and she does ample justice to the complexities of her enormously broad subject. Like Levine's excellent book on the policing of venereal disease in the Empire, a great strength of this one is that it encapsulates a rich account of "how empire was lived and experienced" (p. x) within a powerful narrative organized along clear geographical, chronological, and political lines.[1] At the outset, she poses a series of big questions to which, given the constraints imposed on her by this exercise in compression, she provides impressively subtle and thought-provoking answers: "Who ruled and how? How were men and women treated, regarded, shaped differently by and in the Empire? How did it feel to live under colonial rule, or to impose that rule? How were these experiences different in different kinds of colonies" (p. x)? Her answers bring together political and legal with social and cultural modes of analysis in ways that demonstrate how mutually constitutive these are--without, thankfully, belaboring the point.

Given the breadth of Levine's survey, it would be tedious to attempt a chapter-by-chapter summary of its contents here. A more sensible approach, I think, is to identify several issues she handles particularly well, in hopes that this will convey some sense of the richness of her book. Levine provides a strong and concise account of internal colonialism in the early modern era, noting that the patriotic Britishness that emerged by the early nineteenth century made it "all too easy to forget that the United Kingdom was a product of Britain's larger colonial enterprise, and never a 'natural' connection between quite different groups that, as the Empire was consolidated, were brought together as Great Britain" (p. 12). She properly notes the pervasiveness of unfreedom in the early modern world, while stressing the uniqueness of British slavery in its vast scope, its racial specificity, and its focus on agricultural production. Levine provides a vivid illustration that "the age of reform and of high morals was also quite palpably an age of rapacity" (p. 76) in her ac-

count of the Opium Wars, noting that the Treaty of Tientsin (1858) simultaneously opened China to Christian missionaries for the first time and legalized the highly lucrative British opium trade there. Her narrative effectively highlights the centrality of race and of race-based inequalities in imperial thought, imperial politics, and lived experience in the empire, from the very longstanding assumption that only white settler colonies were fit for self-rule, to the profound social and spatial segregation of colonial cities, to the large wage differentials between white male and indigenous male workers.

Levine provides an especially compelling account of the myriad ways in which colonial political and legal structures subordinated and marginalized indigenous men and women: through forced resettlement, the erosion of small landholdings, and the concentration of the best land in the hands of settlers and indigenous elites; through the perpetuation of master and servant laws that grossly favored employers at the expense of workers for many decades after similar laws had been abolished in Britain, as well as the perpetuation of dangerous and exploitative working conditions across broad swathes of the colonial economy; and through deep intervention in gender relations in the colonies, where "laws dictated not only the contours of paid sex, but also marriage, abortion, infanticide, non-marital sex, age of consent, interracial sex and more" (p. 153). Some of these laws sought to protect women from what were perceived to be repugnant customs such as sati, genital mutilation, and female infanticide. However debatable the efficacy of such laws, they helped to legitimate the colonial enterprise at home, as "it was the failure of colonized men to do right by women that many in Britain saw as justifying the need for British governance" (p. 145). Indigenous men were routinely characterized as hypersexual and at the same time not manly enough to exercise the assertive but dispassionate self-command that their British rulers deemed a prerequisite for political autonomy. Taking all this and much more into account, Levine concludes that the British Empire

"was a place of deep inequality between colonizer and colonized. A few small elite groups, useful to the British, were encouraged and pampered, but the vast majority of those affected by colonial rule were almost certainly worse off as a result. Their lands were appropriated, their access to employment limited and prescribed, their movement often restricted, and their communities redefined and sometimes literally moved from their locations. Although the argument was made that colonialism was a beneficent force, an exercise in enlightened development allowing the entire world to enjoy the benefits of western living, the reality was often one of limitation, constraint and oppression" (p. 141).

In her preface, Levine notes that she has a bone to pick with Bernard Porter, who argues in ***The Absent-Minded Imperialists*** that "imperial Britain was generally a less imperial society than is often assumed."[2] But it seems to me she really has a much bigger argument with Niall Ferguson, with whose ***Empire*** she only glancingly contends in a footnote (p. 122).[3] Porter's book is about what he considers the notably attenuated ways in which empire was reflected in metropolitan society and culture. Levine's book has little to say about metropolitan society and culture, which is perfectly understandable given the space constraints imposed on her, and given how many valuable things she has to say about the lived experience of empire among the colonized. Unlike Porter, however, Ferguson covers the same very broad ground as Levine, and one of his main arguments is that far from being an entirely "Bad Thing," there is a "plausible case" to be made that the British Empire "enhanced global welfare--in other words, was a Good Thing," not least because "no organization in history has done more to promote the free movement of goods, capital and labour," and "no organization has done more to impose Western norms of law, order and gover-

nance around the world."[4] He makes his provocative argument with admirable vigor, and as starkly at odds as it is with Levine's account, it would have been instructive to see her tackle it head-on.

Indeed, the publication of Levine's overview presents hopelessly moderate and middle-of-the-road teachers, such as myself, with a nice dilemma: do we assign our students her book or Ferguson's? Ferguson's is written with matchless brio, is full of ripping yarns that illuminate his broader themes, is lavishly illustrated, pays substantial attention to the social as well as the political and military aspects of British imperialism, and by no means sugarcoats the Empire's horror stories in its effort to find some good in it. Levine's is probably even more comprehensive, is no less thematically clear and consistent, and pays significantly more and quite valuable attention to the impact of empire on colonized men and women, a kind of attention that makes compelling her far more censorious assessment of the Empire. In the future, I shall assign both to my graduate students, and throw in for good measure bits of Bill Nasson's *Britannia's Empire*, yet another excellent overview that's probably too allusive for American undergraduates, but more effective than Levine and Ferguson in reminding readers that the British experience of empire "was inextricably part of a specific stage of European historical experience" that "produced greater or lesser instances of governing maladministration and callousness, as well as military atrocity and terror," however much the "liberal assumptions" of British imperialists "were clearly very different from those of its more autocratic continental counterparts."[5] Three overviews would of course be far too much for my undergraduates to manage. Perhaps with them, I simply will have to indulge my temptation to have it both ways, throw at them hefty but carefully selected portions of both Levine and Ferguson, and try not to smile as I sit back and watch the sparks fly.

Notes

[1]. Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

[2]. Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), xv.

[3]. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[4]. Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

[5]. Bill Nasson, *Britannia's Empire: Making a British World* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2004), 200-201.

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