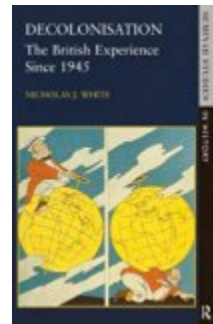


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Nicholas J. White. *Decolonisation: The British Experience Since 1945*. London and New York: Longman, 1999. xii + 153 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-29087-7.

Reviewed by James Gump (Department of History, University of San Diego)
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The Redeployment of British Power

The Redeployment of British Power

In 1945, seven hundred million people worldwide existed as colonial subjects of Great Britain. Two decades later, that number fell to five million, the majority of which resided in Hong Kong.[1] What accounts for this relatively dramatic liquidation of imperial power? Did the British *choose* to dismantle their empire or was decolonization *forced* upon them? If the British chose to decolonize, did their actions spring more from altruistic purpose or cynical design? If decolonization was forced, did the British, more often than not, turn adversity to their advantage? In addressing these questions most scholars have opted for a “magpie’s choice of African nationalism, shifts in national ideology, and changes in the international balance of power.”[2] A successful history of British decolonization however, requires the careful fusion of metropolitan, colonial, and international factors in a comprehensive framework.[3] In this respect, White’s synthesis falls short; nonetheless, it constitutes a useful point of departure for navigating through the historiographical complexities of the decolonization process in the post-WWII era.

White’s volume on British decolonization, part of Longman’s “Seminar Studies in History,” contains separate chapters on the domestic politics of decline, the contours of colonial nationalism in India, Palestine, Burma, Egypt, Malaya, and sub-Saharan Africa, and the global shifts in wealth, power, and legitimacy during the Cold War. His final chapter examines British decolonization in comparative perspective. The appendices include thirty-

one primary documents, which the author employs effectively throughout his text, and an excellent, up-to-date, bibliography.

At the outset, White demonstrates that, to the extent that decolonization was a calculated choice, British policy-makers regarded it as a redeployment rather than a capitulation of British power. As the author puts it, a key tenet of Britain’s decolonization strategy was “the preservation of post-colonial ‘influence,’ as opposed to the complete negation of empire” (p. 35). For Colonial Office officials, this goal could be achieved by the political and economic “advancement” of colonial subjects. This was an enterprise that would increase “non-European stakeholders in the imperial enterprise” it would also “enhance the empire’s efficiency and its propensity for effective exploitation for metropolitan benefit” (Ibid.). The timetable for the official transfer of political power varied according to the colony’s readiness to “advance.” For example, even by 1945 British officialdom envisioned the rapid devolution of power in India (which took place in 1947). For Britain’s other dependencies however, such as those in tropical Africa, the transfer of power seemed far on the horizon. According to White, the preparation for the redeployment of imperial power in Africa resulted in a “second colonial occupation” by hundreds of new bureaucrats in the immediate post-war era, “an unprecedented intrusion into the affairs of [Britain’s] colonial subjects” (p. 49).

White examines the unintended consequences of the “second colonial occupation,” a process that provoked lo-

cal nationalisms and consigned Britain's devolutionary schedule to the dustbin. White briefly explores the internal dynamics of colonial nationalism, focusing on ethnic, regional, and class tensions. As he puts it, "decolonisation should perhaps be seen as a 'struggle for who should rule' rather than a 'struggle against colonial rule'" (p. 58). Yet White does not develop this theme in any depth nor does he relate local nationalisms to metropolitan and international forces in a convincing chronological framework. White is on much more solid ground, and writes with much greater authority, in his analysis of international relations and the decolonization process.

The colonial system that had come into existence between c. 1880 and 1914, became increasingly marginalized in world politics after WWII. White examines the role of the United States in the post-war world, first as an ally of British imperialism and then as a champion of anti-colonialism. In the years immediately following the war, the United States supported British imperialism in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East as a means for checking Soviet expansionism. By the mid-1950s however, the Americans came "to view controlled decolonisation as an essential element in Cold War strategy; the continuance of European imperialism would only drive nationalist movements into the arms of the Soviet Union" (p. 68). American Cold War policy and British imperial policy symbolically collided at Suez in 1956, when the United States failed to support Britain's invasion of Egypt. In the wake of the Suez crisis, Prime Minister Anthony Eden wrote: "[W]e must review our world position and our domestic capacity more search-

ingly in the light of the Suez experience, which has not so much changed our fortune as revealed realities" (p. 129). Eden's successor, Harold Macmillan, recognized these realities and oversaw the lion's share of imperial liquidation. Yet Macmillan's aim varied little from his Victorian predecessors. As historian Wm. Roger Louis puts it, "the goal was not that Britain should sustain the Empire but that the Empire, in a new form, should continue to sustain Britain." [4]

Notes

[1]. Wm. Roger Louis, "The Dissolution of the British Empire," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (cited hereinafter as OHBE), v. 4, eds. Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 330.

[2]. Wm. Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, "The United States and the Liquidation of British Empire in Tropical Africa, 1941-1951," in *The Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonization, 1940-1960*, eds. Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 31.

[3]. John Darwin, "Decolonization and the End of Empire," in OHBE, v. 5, ed. Robin W. Winks, 552.

[4]. Louis, "Dissolution," 330.

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