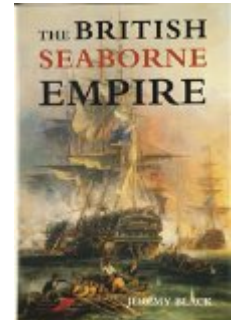


**Jeremy Black.** *The British Seaborne Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xii + 420 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-10386-1.



**Reviewed by** Denver Brunzman

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Jeremy Black's *The British Seaborne Empire* is an ambitious work that deliberately echoes the titles of C.R. Boxer's classic books, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (1965) and *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825* (1969), as well as J.H. Parry's *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (1966). These earlier works masterfully charted the overseas expansions of European empires beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the ongoing formal and informal connections that colonial traders and settlements maintained with their respective mother countries. Black does this and more. Rather than end his story in the early nineteenth century, as did Boxer and Parry, he carries it to the present day. For this reason, more apt comparisons of his work may be to Paul M. Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (1976) and Arthur Herman's *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (2004). But, again, Black sets a broader agenda than either of these works by tracing not just naval development but a plethora of sea-based imperial activities, including merchant shipping, commercial fishing, privateering, exploration, migration, and the place of the sea in

mainstream British culture. He argues persuasively that the British case shows that empire was not solely the conquest and administration of foreign territories and subjects but control over trade and the seas. Sea power, in short, "made the empire what it was" (p. x).

Yet Black's attempt to follow so many historical strands also poses challenges. He admits, "There is no central narrative to the seaborne empire. It involved trade and war, fishing and shipbuilding, piracy and seaborne development, emigration, immigration and a myriad of other links" (p. 355). Indeed, at times *The British Seaborne Empire* covers so many topics that it reads as an endless list of dates and facts without any true depth. The accomplishment in Black's broad historical and historiographical coverage is drawing links between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British imperial activity, which historians have increasingly resorted to dividing into the "first" and "second" British empires (with the American Revolution usually acting as the dividing marker). Where other historians identify a shift to a more territorial British empire in the nineteenth centu-

ry, Black shows the ways in which it remained "seaborne." Naval hegemony made possible free trade, active patterns of migration and resettlement within the empire, anti-slavery patrols, and the more traditional image of British redcoats in India and Africa. While the British had an empire covering a fifth of the world's land surface by 1900, Black finds it equally, if not more, important that at the same time the empire also accounted for 45 percent of the world's shipping tonnage.

Black recounts familiar episodes in tracing the rise of British sea power, including Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the world, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the growth of overseas trading companies, particularly the East India Company. But he also emphasizes the significance of less famous enterprises, such as the Newfoundland fisheries. The fisheries were essential to the development of seaborne empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for leading large numbers of ships and men to cross the Atlantic. In the process, the English gained invaluable knowledge about Atlantic navigation that they put to use in establishing permanent settlements in the New World. By the middle third of the eighteenth century, the British people understood mastery of the seas to be part of their unique destiny. Black borrows from the recent work of David Armitage to suggest that Britishness encompassed an entire ideology that linked trade and maritime empire with liberty, in contrast to the supposed tyranny of land-based empires.

Of course, Britain had its fair share of territorial conquest. But Black finds irony in that the bulk of British colonial gains were made in the Seven Years' War and French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, "conflicts whose initial purposes were not major colonial conquests" (p. 125). For him, British imperial activity in China in the nineteenth century merits as much attention as British involvement in India. The absence of British territorial control in China meant that the emphasis

remained on maritime power, specifically the control of ports and trade. The Opium War of 1839-42 notwithstanding, the British experience in China demonstrated the advantages of seaborne empire over continental empire. India does not fit as neatly into Black's framework, and he gives the topic relatively short treatment. Potential readers should take caution, therefore, that Black's work is not, nor does it intend to be, a comprehensive treatment of all features of the British Empire.

Black concludes his work by analyzing the decline of British sea--and by extension, imperial--power in the twentieth century. After discussing the Royal Navy's key role in Allied victories in World Wars I and II, he describes the humbling events that marked the end of Britain's superpower status, including decolonization; the Suez Crisis of 1956; the ascendancy of American military and economic might; and Britain's loan from the International Monetary Fund in 1976. Black makes the fascinating argument that the British public increasingly lost interest in the sea while these and other events took place. The images of the romantic English countryside and the industrial urban landscape each came to define Englishness more than naval warships and merchant vessels. In 1943, at the Tehran Conference, Franklin Roosevelt told Winston Churchill that Britons had to adjust to a "new period" in history and to turn their backs on "400 years of acquisitive blood in your veins" (p. 308). By turning away from the sea, Black shows, the British went far in honoring Roosevelt's request.

And, yet, one lesson of *The British Seaborne Empire* is that Britain's empire and international influence have never completely diminished. Like Niall Ferguson, Black sees most of this influence being expressed through Britain's former American colonies, the United States. But, unlike Ferguson, Black identifies Britain as the empire in denial. He notes that today Britain still has more overseas possessions than in 1500. One symptom

of Britain's collective imperial denial is the popularity of fiction, such as Patrick O'Brian's maritime novels and C.S. Forester's Hornblower series, set in the age of sail, not steam. Black opines that Britons find solace in stories set in the days before their nation was perceived as an aggressive territorial empire. By reading his impressive book, however, they would know that, for good or bad, the sea was never a diversion from British imperial glory, but always the pathway to it.

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