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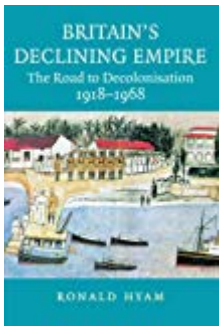
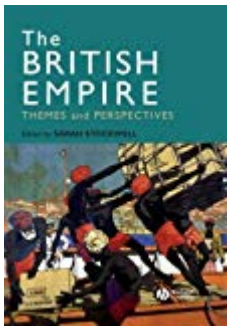


Ronald Hyam. *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 464 pp $32.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-68555-9.



Sarah Stockwell. *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives.* Malden, MA/Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008. 355 S. $34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4051-2535-2.

Reviewed by Stephen J. Heathorn

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Commissioned by Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

Sarah Stockwell's opening observation in her chapter, "Ends of Empire" in *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives*, effectively summarizes the character of Ronald Hyam's monograph *Britain's Declining Empire*: "traditional in appearance; high politics take centre stage, with historians essentially concerned with why and how the empire was lost" (p. 267). To be sure, Hyam's book advances the least favored of the high-political and policy-oriented interpretations that have been advanced since John Darwin and R. F. Holland surveyed the field,[1] but the study *is* the product of that very process of the "gradual opening of relevant archival deposits" that Stockwell indicates has driven scholarship on decolonization, at least until quite recently. Indeed, few scholars could have been better equipped to conduct a study based on the opening up of archival deposits: for the past two decades, Hyam has been one of the principal editors of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies' eighteen-volume *British Documents on the End of Empire* project (1992-2008).

Hyam's book explores high politics and policymaking across the empire from the apex of expansion at the end of the First World War to the retreat from east of Suez and the end of Harold Wilson's first term as prime minister. Echoing the

strictures of Bernard Porter,[2] Hyam's entire book rests on the view that the empire only ever really concerned those who ran it and it was they that dismantled it. Consequently, the discussion of postcolonial approaches is cursory, as is attention to the broader domestic impact of empire (dismissed in a lengthy footnote based on Porter's work and on personal reminiscence). Neither do considerations of race or gender feature prominently in the wider analysis. Hyam does allude to British nationalism and domestic race issues, but he concludes that racial categorization was only ever a bureaucratic tendency rather than the basis or motor of formal policy: "the most that can be said is that race was a useful supporting mechanism for the imperial structure" (p. 39). Moreover, he questions the significance of derogatory racial attitudes that appeared in policymakers' private communications by arguing "we need to distinguish between words and actions, ideas and the implementation" (p. 40). His test case is Winston Churchill, about whom Hyam concludes, he might well have been "racially prejudiced" but his record as a minister "was invariably directed towards fairness, justice, pragmatism, and racial reconciliation" (p. 41), and who therefore, certainly was not a "malignant racist" (p. 42).

The historiography in which Hyam does places his study is that of the existing political narratives of the end of empire, of which there have been four main interpretations: (1), the empire was assailed by, and succumbed to, nationalist pressure; (2), it was overcome by internal economic weakness; (3), its rulers experienced a "failure of nerve," in effect losing the confidence to defend the empire to their own population; and (4), British imperialism folded under international criticism during the Cold War. The last of these four interpretations, Hyam rightly suggests, has been the least popular among historians to date, yet it is the one, he argues, that best explains the decline and fall of the empire. Moreover, because the empire's administrative elite were driven by pragmatism and not ideology, the process of dismantling the imperial edifice was largely orderly, overseen by the political elite in London who were more concerned with domestic issues and with fighting international communism than in preserving what had become an extraneous burden.

The starting point for Hyam's study is the "dysfunctionality" of the interwar empire and the steady rise in "pragmatic responses" to local colonial circumstances. This pragmatism led to a growing perception of the inevitability of decolonization among the "official mind" (Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's memorable term for the world view of politicians and bureaucrats who administered the empire's rise, maintenance, and fall).[3] Initially after the Second World War, British policymakers thought that the empire might be able to contribute to the West's anticommunist struggle in the emerging Cold War, but American anticolonial rhetoric and geopolitical dominance effectively ended that illusion. So policymakers embraced disengagement from empire as the only way to safeguard Britain's international credibility and prestige. This was made unavoidable by successive postwar developments: at first the need to protect the special relationship with a Washington that was both formally opposed to empire and Britain's major creditor; then the difficulty of balancing the ideal (and even more difficult, the reality) of the Commonwealth with the emerging European Community; and finally, the mounting criticism of imperialism at the United Nations--often parsed through comparison with the decolonization (or colonial struggles) of the other European empires. The "official mind" was simultaneously reactive to these international developments, but also bound by the decisions made by its predecessors, hence the necessity to understand the evolution of imperial policy, and the personalities who made it, through meticulous administrative archival research. The result is that ***Britain's Declining Empire*** is structured around five chronological chapters, with the last four full of biographical sketches and judgments

on individual politicians and bureaucrats, excellent event and policy summaries, and masses of documentation from the British National Archives.

Hyam makes no pretense that the empire was anything other than a collection of strikingly different units with individual histories and legacies, but as he makes the argument that it was the policymakers at the imperial center that only ever really mattered, ultimately this book is an attempt to demonstrate how the necessarily diverse pragmatism of the "dysfunctional" interwar empire gave rise to, if not a unitary, then at least the consensual response of pragmatic decolonization. While admirably complicating his story with the false starts and blind back alleys off the "road to decolonization" (the revealing subtitle to his book), Hyam nevertheless searches for, and finds, the order in the process--for him, decolonization was a purposeful path guided by *raison d'État*.

The Stockwell collection, ***The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives,*** on the other hand, suggests that the empire was always going off in many directions at once, often in entirely contradictory ways, and rarely directed by the state. This collection addresses a large range of historiographical debates and questions, many of which have tended to polarize scholars and readers. In almost every case, the contributors pull apart those polarities and aim to complicate the questions. Was the empire good for the British economy? Yes and no, but this is probably the wrong question as cost/benefit analysis diminishes the complex relationships among economic and imperial activity. Were missionaries the aiders and abettors of imperialism? Sometimes, sometimes not; the connections between "religion" and empire were always extremely complex and often conflicting. Was there a distinctive ideology of British imperialism? No, but various ideologies might have been applied, propagandized, or complicit, with varying levels of success--the effects of which are in any case very difficult to measure. The volume as a whole queries the applicability of simplistic questions, critically cross-examines unitary narrative explanations, and fundamentally dismisses simple answers. That the various authors manage to do this while remaining coherent and, for the most part, readable, is a testament to the high quality of both the individual essays and Stockwell's coordination of the project as a whole.

Stockwell's own essay on decolonization usefully surveys the recent work on decolonization--its origins and trajectory (the themes of Hyam's book, which was published too late to be considered in Stockwell's essay); its management, particularly with reference to its myths and the use of violence, but also the attempt to preserve an imperial role once rule had gone; and its impact on the British both in the colonies/commonwealth and in the "home" islands. These last two issues, now rapidly garnering more attention from scholars, point to the future of the field: Hyam's book, while salutary in its recognition that decolonization had much to do with contemporary international politics and the attempt by the British to remain relevant in an increasingly bipolar world, looks in comparison to the new scholarship rather dated in its approach and lack of interest in social and broader cultural themes.

The other essays in the collection also reflect on both the variety of the British imperial experience and on the resurgence of scholarly interest (and controversy) in it, providing ample basic context and description (so that the book could very easily and usefully be used as a teaching text for undergraduates), combined with some sophisticated historiographical discussion. John Darwin's opening essay sets the tone for the volume as a whole, detailing the diversity of the empire's units and constitutional arrangements, while Eliga Gould provides a stimulating discussion of the "foundations" of the modern empire centered on the loss of the thirteen American colonies. This chapter, chronological rather than thematic, is, as Stockwell rightly notes in her preface, an excel-

lent introduction to the burgeoning scholarship on the "Atlantic World." Andrew Dilley and Kent Fedorowich provide essential, if at times quite dry, discussions of the economics of empire and of the movement of people within it. Fedorowich's chapter is particularly difficult; a maze of statistics, it nonetheless demonstrates that the empire was a massive engine of demographic shifts. Andrew Thompson reflects on the relationship of the British state to the empire, and while confirming the view that the empire expanded mostly due to the initiative of private citizens, repeats his well-established conclusion from ***The Empire Strikes Back?*** (2005), that imperial expansion allowed the expansion of the borders of domestic society (particularly networks or circuits of professionals, migrants, missionaries, businesses), ultimately resulting in a blurring of boundaries between state and society.

Elizabeth Elbourne's chapter on religion starts with an excellent discussion of the difficulties of defining religion in the context of empire and then goes on to provide an argument on how the related but never coterminous institutions (British and indigenous) and beliefs, emotions, and ideas of religion had an impact on, and were in the process transformed by, the imperial experience. Stephen Howe questions the idea that British imperialism was guided by a dominant ideology; Tony Ballantyne surveys the recent scholarship on "colonial knowledge"; and Jon E. Wilson tackles the problematic terms "agency," "narrative," and "resistance," and their use in understanding the imperial subject or subaltern experience. All three essays aim to interrogate and problematize the concepts and categories of analysis that have grown up around the study of empire in the past forty years. Finally, Catherine Hall and Stuart Ward both tackle the role of the empire in forging individual identities: the former within the metropole, the latter "abroad." These two chapters make for an interesting comparison. After a paragraph-long critique of Bernard Porter's empiricism, Hall's chapter is divided between some useful discussion of the contribution of postcolonial scholarship, and a case study--based on William Thackeray's novel ***Vanity Fair*** (1847)--which aims to demonstrate how a post-colonial theoretical interpretation can explain the taken-for-granted assumptions of a society in which the imperial was an integral part of the popular imagination. In contrast, Ward's chapter aims to understand how white Britons who settled in the Dominions and colonies negotiated their relationship with both their new homes and the "mother country." His discussion of identity is largely rooted in political categories and ethnic and linguistic ties, and ultimately the relationship of the individual to the state.

Overall, the Stockwell collection provides an excellent overview of the current terrain of British imperial studies and points to the directions scholarship will likely travel in the future; Hyam's monograph, painstaking research achievement and near definitive statement on late-imperial policy though it is, is more indicative of the highways imperial scholarship has already traversed.

Notes

[1]. John Darwin, ***Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-war World*** (London: Macmillan, 1988), and T***he End of the British Empire: the Historical Debate*** (London: Blackwell, 1991); R. F. Holland, ***European Decolonisation, 1945-61: An Introductory Survey*** (London: Macmillan, 1985).

[2]. Bernard Porter, ***The Absent-Minded Imperialists*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[3]. Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, ***Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*** (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1961).

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