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**The End of Britain's Empire**

When I was asked to write a review for *Beyond Empire: The End of Britain's Colonial Encounter*, as a historian of twentieth-century Ghana I was naturally curious. Since the author, John T. Ducker, is a former colonial official who spent many years in Africa, I anticipated a personal account of his experience. However, the book presents an attempt at a historical analysis of the British Empire, especially for the period from 1920 to the 1960s. The book is divided into eight chapters with several annexes containing primary sources.

Chapter 1 briefly provides a historical background to decolonization, yet largely focuses on colonization, explaining how British rule in some parts of Africa and elsewhere was “stubbornly resisted” (p. 7). This colonial perspective and vocabulary run throughout the book. The chapter also states that settler societies in the empire had certain difficulties with indigenous populations but that in North American and Australia the latter were eventually “submerged,” and argues that settlers were of economic benefit in terms of technology transfer and generation of public revenue, failing to mention that this benefit was almost exclusively to the British Empire (p. 7). The short first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book, in which colonialism is seen as an inherent right of the British. The author elaborates on the benefit of British settler presence, without discussing the atrocities that indigenous populations endured at the hand of the British.

Chapter 2 focuses on the British government and colonial policies in the empire, and includes sections on each colony across the globe. Here, the author argues that immediately after World War II the British Empire was dedicated to economic development and welfare in the colonies, of which the transfer of development projects to local governments, was part. He does not discuss how this transfer of development projects was connected to the history of forced labor.[1] In this chapter the author also points out that despite the British already starting the transfer of rule, “in no case were there sufficient men and women capable of running the machinery of government” (p. 31).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to education in the colonies, which of course refers to formal, Western education, predominantly carried out by missionaries in what he described as “a true labor of love and dedication” (p. 92). Eurocentrism is equally pervasive in this chapter, as the author discusses the “issues” of creating modern states with “uneducated” people. He argues that the rise
of formal education was set to cause disruptions as traditional rulers of the 1920s and 1930s lacked such education and saw educated youths as a challenge to their rule. To the contrary, many chiefs were eager for their children to obtain education and understood how to use Western education to their advantage.[2] In reality, colonial governments weren't interested in providing education on a large scale, as the labor exploitation of the colonized populations for the extraction of raw material for industrial processing in Europe was based on unskilled labor.

Chapter 4 looks at the period leading up to independence and contains subchapters on each colony or region listing the historical events, often of administrative nature. Here, the implementation of indirect rule is hailed as a central instrument in teaching Africans to govern themselves: “It gave people a sense of responsibility and as the local organizations bedded in, it gave the people themselves a chance of running their own affairs and spending their own money” (p. 111). Indirect rule was not introduced to the benefit of the colonized but rather the colonizer.[3] The chapter concludes with Ducker paternalistically exclaiming he has shown in a pragmatic way how colonial officials prepared colonies for self-government and independence: "In general however it can be said that the whole process was very rushed in some countries, compressed into a few years and independence was arguably premature in several countries" (p. 190).

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the localization of the public service in the colonies in preparation for independence. Ducker argues that the British colonial government accepted the obligation to transfer self-government. Yet, the author uses this opportunity to question again the decision to relinquish control over the public service, contending that a continued occupation of British officials would have been in the interest of the colonies. In chapter 6 Ducker lists the influence of other countries as well as the United Nations in the history of the British Empire. Interestingly, the Asian-African Bandung Conference only received five lines, while the conference of independent African states and of the communist states are summarized in less than two pages (pp. 258-159).

Chapter 7, on the press coverage of the British Empire, seems the most curious. The chapter lists newspaper articles categorized by decade without analysis or critical engagement of any sort. He states: “If readers come to these excerpts with an open mind, they will I think conclude that the press brought a varied, serious and informative approach to their reporting and editorials, entirely appropriate to the topic and their role. There have been different interpretations put subsequently on some of the events described or on the coverage by reporters and editors. However, these are necessarily ex post facto and not necessarily more accurate, well informed or objective” (p. 262).

On p. 269, the author lists articles that argue that most of the colonized people have been far better off in terms of literacy, life expectancy, and income. However, such developments were not the motive for colonialism and were implemented where it was of benefit to the colonial governments.[4] Again, the cruel and violent realities indigenous populations have endured in terms of land alienation and labor exploitation are overlooked. The author continues to state that what the press coverage “did not do, or attempt so far as I can see, is to represent in any way the emerging opinions of African writers and academics, mainly because few had much to say up to the 1960s when decisions were being taken” (p. 321). Needless to say, the author did not include newspaper articles from the colonies that contain countless voices and opinions of intellectuals on colonialism. Many of these newspapers are easily accessible in print or microfilm at the British Library in London.

The reader does not have to make it through all seven chapters to grasp the author’s opinion on
the British Empire and (de)colonization. Therefore, his proclamations made in the last chapter, arguably the conclusion, should come as no surprise: “The history of the British Empire is replete with practical men and women hammering out solutions to the problems, mistakes and opportunities confronting them. It is sad that the pressure of early decolonization was such that there was too little time in Africa to complete the job as it could have been done” (p. 322). Ignoring the centuries-long exploitation of the Global South through the British Empire, Ducker argues that a deferral of independence for a few years would have provided the colonies with the necessary social, economic, educational, and public infrastructure for sustainable development. This last chapter continues to focus on the crimes and failures of Independence-era governments, a perspective the author conveniently left out for the colonial period. He ends by asserting that the “premature” arrival of independence has worked to the disadvantage of most colonized populations (p. 332).

In spite of the author not presenting a hypothesis or argument to guide this book, it is clear from the narrative that he considers the British Empire a benevolent entity that worked relentlessly to assist the colonies in obtaining the skills to rule themselves. However, according to him, their mission was cut short by the “premature” desire of colonial subjects for independence, before they had actually obtained adequate skills, which subsequently caused African peoples to suffer under independent governments. The book paints a picture of incompetent African indigenous and independent states, and colonialism primarily as a benevolent act of welfare and development. Ducker fails to adequately explain the economic motives behind colonization and the British Empire throughout the book. I would like to say that the narrative the book presents seems like a historical relic itself, but unfortunately, apologetic histories of colonialism and the empire still turn up. [5] Ducker repeats colonial terminology (for example, “tribes” and “tribal”) and perspectives rather than questioning, analyzing, or contextualizing them as historians are trained to do. In addition, he only cites twenty-one historical studies, all by men from the Global North. Most of these cited works were published before 1990. The only cited works published after 2000 are on Winston Churchill and MI5. Ducker completely disregards any critical engagement with the British Empire, including the works of any historian of former colonies and their diasporas.

In addition, the book lacks academic rigor in terms of referencing, as many direct quotes miss a reference to the primary source. For primary sources, the author only lists the signature, but nothing else. Missing is information about the archive, date range, and specific document of the folder cited, which is crucial in validating his findings. The references in the endnotes do not comply with any reference style and leave out crucial information, such as article titles. In the text, footnotes are placed before the punctuation as well as after; where several footnotes are listed after a sentence, they are occasionally separated by a comma. The academic shortcomings of this book in terms of analysis and methodology are that much more surprising since Bloomsbury lists this book under its Academic and Professional Publications category.

Based on the narrative and methodology, it is difficult to pinpoint any audience for this book, other than defenders of colonialism. Historiography on the British Empire has evolved to such an extent that the narrative of the book under review is outdated and not useful for undergraduate students or academic audiences. For a public audience, I am afraid that this book only regurgitates old notions on the British Empire and colonization that historians have spent decades on dismantling. [6]

Notes

[1]. Alexander Keese, “Slow Abolition within the Colonial Mind: British and French Debates


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