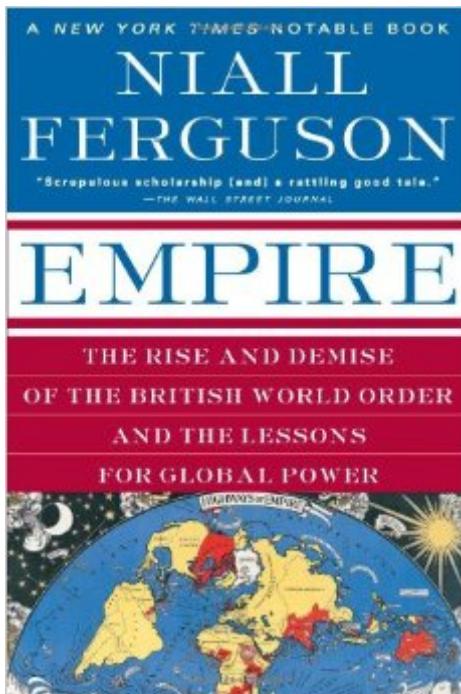


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Empire: The Rise And Demise Of The British World Order And The Lessons For Global Power



Synopsis

The British Empire was the largest in all history: the nearest thing to world domination ever achieved. By the eve of World War II, around a quarter of the world's land surface was under some form of British rule. Yet for today's generation, the British Empire seems a Victorian irrelevance. The time is ripe for a reappraisal, and in Empire, Niall Ferguson boldly recasts the British Empire as one of the world's greatest modernizing forces. An important new work of synthesis and revision, Empire argues that the world we know today is in large measure the product of Britain's Age of Empire. The spread of capitalism, the communications revolution, the notion of humanitarianism, and the institutions of parliamentary democracy-all these can be traced back to the extraordinary expansion of Britain's economy, population, and culture from the seventeenth century until the mid-twentieth. On a vast and vividly colored canvas, Empire shows how the British Empire acted as midwife to modernity. Displaying the originality and rigor that have made him the brightest light among British historians, Ferguson shows that the story of the Empire is pregnant with lessons for today-in particular for the United States as it stands on the brink of a new era of imperial power, based once again on economic and military supremacy. A dazzling tour de force, Empire is a remarkable reappraisal of the prizes and pitfalls of global empire.

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Customer Reviews

Niall Ferguson has made a name for himself as the historian of counterfactuals, or imaginative looks at "history as it could have been." He was the editor of *Virtual History*, which provides alternate scenarios of past events, and the author of *The Pity of War*, a look at World War I which concluded

that the world would be immensely better off today if the British had stayed out in August 1914 and let the Germans win. Now in Empire Ferguson has given us a history of the British Empire which any nineteenth century imperialist would pronounce to be pukka, or first rate. Basically Ferguson argues that the British Empire was a positive contribution to the world in that it gave its colonial possessions traditions like self-government and personal liberties. Ferguson does not maintain that there were no abuses of power or that none of the indigenous peoples ruled by British officials were ever mistreated, but he does believe that on balance, more good was done than bad. He makes this argument most strongly in covering the twentieth century, when he points out that the British were much better colonial rulers than the Germans or Japanese were. Most of Empire's readers will undoubtedly agree with this point, but many will also wonder why it was necessary for the British to colonize these peoples in the first place. Ferguson is straightforward, saying that the original reason for imperialism was greed for products like tea. More highflown objectives like ending the slave trade and converting "primitive" areas to civilization and Christianity came much later, and never diverted attention for very long from the basic quest for wealth. Ferguson is also direct in saying that the major reason for the end of the Empire after World War II was that it was simply too expensive to keep going.

I almost didn't purchase this book, because some professional reviewers denigrated it as an "apology" for the British Empire. I'm glad I didn't listen to those reviewers and, after reading the book, I'm puzzled that anyone could come to that conclusion. Professor Ferguson spends a good portion of the book detailing many of the negative aspects of the Empire- the condescending and racist attitudes, frequently, that were displayed by the British towards subject peoples; the excessive use of force (literally, overkill) in places such as Omdurman (where the British, and their Egyptian and Sudanese auxiliaries, used Maxim machine guns to mow down their Islamic fundamentalist opponents, who were generally armed with rifles and swords. The fundamentalist forces had about 35,000 men killed, while the British lost about 400.) and Amritsar, India (where, in 1919, the British forces broke up a peaceful demonstration by firing on unarmed civilians and killing 379 and injuring 1,500 of them). Professor Ferguson also does not sweep British behavior during the Boer War under the historical carpet. He discusses the concentration camps the British set up to detain the wives and children of Boer soldiers. Conditions, especially in the beginning, were horrendous and many of the women and children died from hunger and disease. (When Sir Nevile Henderson complained to Goering about the Nazi concentration camps, Goering leapt at the chance to take out a German encyclopaedia which, under the entry for concentration camp, said this: "First used by the

British in the South African War").

Let's start with the reviews. When you read them, try to keep in mind the simple fact that this book is both describing an historical era (the British Empire) and assessing it. Not all historians do the latter; and too many are content to do a boring job of the former. I think Ferguson does a superb job on both fronts, but it is nonetheless possible to disagree with his assessment of the empire while admiring his well-paced narrative and lavishly illustrated survey of it. How the Empire came into being; why it was British (as opposed to Spanish, Dutch or other); how it operated; how it was funded; who its beneficiaries were; what it did badly; the horrors of which it was guilty; piracy on high seas, the slave trade, its role in Africa, India, Australia, Ireland and elsewhere: Niall Ferguson captures it all. But not just that..He is interested in applying the lesson of Empire to the world today. It is the modern world, after all, that the Empire shaped for better or worse. And here we arrive at Ferguson's assessment. Readers might take issue with a balance sheet approach to the Empire, and they make take issue with the evaluation itself, but in providing us with such an assessment Ferguson brings the Empire to life in these pages. On net, the Empire was a positive good, if only because "in the end, the British sacrificed her Empire to stop the Germans, Japanese and Italians from keeping theirs. Did not that sacrifice alone expunge all the Empire's other sins?" Ferguson thinks so. I agree. Others may not. You don't need to agree with his conclusions, but you cannot walk away from the question, for now the United States is poised to be an Empire -- an Empire in denial in Ferguson's view -- and whether and to what extent the U.S.

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