

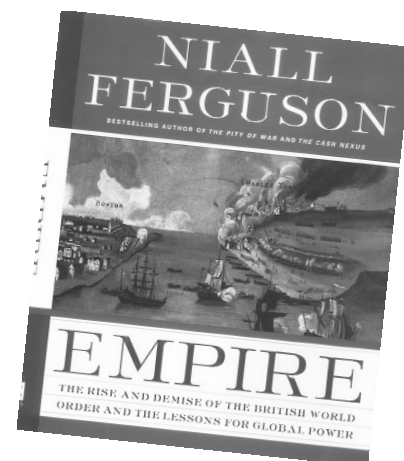
BOOK REVIEW

by J. William Galbraith

Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, Basic Books, New York, 2003. pp. 392. (first published in the U.K. by Allen Lane, London, 2002) \$49.95 in Canada.

Transatlantic relations, and in particular those between the United States and Britain, are at the top of the international affairs agenda. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has been embroiled in domestic political problems. In large part this is because of his strong support, critics imply toadying, to U.S. President George Bush the younger, following the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on September 11th, 2001 and more recently in the action to overthrow Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The fact that this relationship is at the centre of so much attention reflects its determining role in the world during the 20th century. Little appreciated, in most news “analysis” is the strength of this “special relationship”. It has very deep roots. As if personifying this link, the author himself straddles the Atlantic. The British-born Niall Ferguson is Professor of Financial History at the Stern School of Business, New York University, and Senior Research Fellow at Jesus College, Oxford. He has written a fascinating and very readable book, well-structured and richly illustrated. It reveals not only the depths of this unique relationship, but establishes a very plausible case that globalization, via empire, Ferguson uses the term “Anglobalization”, was beneficial for the colonies. Very many of them, later described as “developing countries”, are now poorer than at the time of de-colonization. *Empire* is a balanced assessment of the British Empire, refreshing in itself, after the ideological “histories” we have become accustomed to hearing and reflected in declarations, as Ferguson uses for example, such as from the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. There were indeed aspects and times during which the British Empire, parts of it or individuals representing it, did bad things, as Ferguson acknowledges and lays out, sometimes in gruesome detail. But it was also a very significant force for good. Reminiscent of Churchill’s comment about democracy being the worst form of government except for all others, Ferguson pronounces that “(t)here could not have

been a less bloody path to modernity than the British Empire.” Along the fascinating trajectory to imperial prominence, Ferguson delights the reader with great dexterity of detail and style. And since he is a professor of financial history, economics is never far from the surface. It is here, however, that one wonders how sound some of the statistics are that reach back into the 19th century, for example, U.K. net foreign investment as a percent of GNP. All the while, though, Ferguson keeps the reader aware of the large sweep of history, evident, for example, in the title of his first chapter, “Why Britain?”. That sweep describes how the British empire started in reaction to the Catholic Spanish and Portuguese empires; robbed the Spaniards, with Queen Elizabeth I essentially licensing the pirates (gaining wealth); copied the Dutch (significantly in financial matters, enhancing their economic and fiscal powers which in turn helped build their navy and army); beat the French; plundered the Indians (though later on he argues there was more investment in India than was taken out); and finally “ruled supreme” under the Empress Queen, Victoria, who came to personify the greatness of the Empire. One significant feature distinguishing the British Empire from the Spanish and Portuguese was the large British exodus to the colonies; 20 million people emigrated between the 1600s and 1950s – the “White Plague”, as the second chapter is entitled. Without this emigration, there would have been no Empire. Ferguson startles the reader with myth-breaking detail, upsetting our commonly-held beliefs about the Mayflower passengers. In fact, only about a third of the passengers were “Pilgrims”. The remainder were more material minded, responding to ads by the Virginia Company. The American revolution provides more than its share of popular myths underpinning American character and culture. Ferguson dispels many of them. For example, the American Revolution was not “the straightforward fight between Patriots and wicked Nazi-like Redcoats.” The worst of the violence was perpetrated by rebel colonists against their countrymen who remained loyal to the King. The irony, he points out, is that this is the country that won independence in the name of liberty and then went on to perpetuate slavery in the southern states, ending it only with a civil war. The balance in Ferguson’s approach is clear, as he



describes the Empire in the 18th century as “at best, amoral ... grabbing power in Asia, land in America and slaves in Africa.” On the plus side, he points out that “the distant imperial authority in London was more inclined to recognize the rights of native Americans than the land-hungry colonists on the spot.” He might have added how the First Nations in Canada continue to regard the Crown with a respect denied the federal government. It was these undercurrents that surfaced to produce the next phase of the Empire – “The Mission” (Chapter 3).

Ferguson describes the evolution of the British presence in India and recounts some of the bad things done. He continues to correct popular misconceptions though, explaining that the 1857 Indian Mutiny wasn’t a simple “black and white” event. The “British” army that captured Delhi was mostly Indian. It is in recounting these episodes that in one instance Ferguson tries too hard to be literary in his analogies, but ends up writing in very bad taste (at page 152).

The fascinating exploration of Africa allows Ferguson scope to describe characters and events in terms that we can relate to today. With clear admiration, he describes Dr. Livingstone, who was ordained as a minister and qualified as a medical doctor at the same time, variously as a “Victorian super-man”, a “one-man NGO”, and the first “doctor without borders”. Livingstone’s legacy is that Africa is now more Christian than Europe; it is a superficial point, however, in terms only of population. Of that famous greeting when the American Henry Stanley found Dr. Livingstone on the shore of Lake Tanganyika, after a ten-month search, Ferguson notes: “It took an American to take British understatement to its historic zenith.” While India was the strategic core of the Empire, it and the entire globe-straddling structure was amazingly inexpensive to defend. In large part, this was due to the global network of telegraphs and steam engines,

and to the Indian Army. All of this combined to produce "Heaven's Breed" (Chapter 4), and the incomparable Indian Civil Service, the entrance exams for which would make today's PhD candidates blanch! Kipling gave poetic voice to it all. In Ferguson's phrasing, it was Tory-entalism, personified by Lord Curzon, appointed Viceroy of India in 1898. For all the negatives, though, Ferguson concludes that there can "be little doubt that British rule reduced inequalities in India" compared with life for the vast majority of the population under Indian rulers. Elsewhere, troubles surfaced with a revolt in Jamaica in the 1860s, by Blacks whose lot was not improving despite the abolition of slavery. It ended with the Australia-toughened Governor-in-Chief, Edward Eyre, resigning and being subject to legal actions in England, as an accessory to murder. It was an episode, Ferguson explains, that pitted liberal intellectuals like Charles Darwin and John Stuart Mill against supporters of Eyre, including Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens and Tennyson. The conscience was growing.

As the Empire expanded, with finances, military power and technology in its service, great discussions developed as to the form and purpose of Empire. But Cecil Rhodes, dreaming of a Cape to Cairo railroad, represented a desire to return to pre-Victorian imperialism, finding new markets, new colonies and, Ferguson adds ominously, if necessary to wage new wars (Chapter 5, "Maxim Force"). Technology, in particular Hiram Maxim's gun, allowed the British Army to dominate battles against spears and arrows, wiping out armies much larger in numbers, as at Omdurman in 1898 when 52,000 Islamic fundamentalist dervishes faced just 20,000 British troops. While the invention of this machine gun was American, Ferguson writes, Maxim "always had his eye firmly on the British market."

Despite a still strong current of imperialism, this was also a time when self-doubting began, in part because of the difficulties of the Boer War, which had a profound impact in Britain; not least of which included the shock of British troops being slaughtered at Spion Kop in South Africa in 1900 – the "other side" now also had the Maxim gun. During the first decade of the 20th century, developments in Germany stirred numerous British authors to write novels portraying a German military threat to Britain. Chapter 6, "Empire For Sale", opens and deals extensively with the First World War, noting the oft-neglected role of

Empire troops, including Indian and African. As a result of that war, the British economy was hobbled by enormous debt.

Iconoclasts, cynics and intellectual snobbery began moving upstage, mocking the Empire: Noel Coward, P.G. Wodehouse, Evelyn Waugh and others. Even heroes, such as T. E. Lawrence, reinforced this mood through their subsequent behaviour, and in Lawrence's case his death in a motorcycle accident in 1935.

Ferguson notes that the Great Depression was milder in Britain than it was in either the United States or Germany. The reason, he explains with emphasis, was not Keynesian economics but rather the system of Imperial Preference for tariffs. As the political bonds were loosening, the economic ones were strengthening. Ironically, though, Australia didn't loosen its political bonds to Britain, by not adopting the 1931 Statute of Westminster, until the 1940s; but with one more twist, which Ferguson doesn't mention, the Aussies did have an Australian-born Governor-General, appointed in the early 1930s, twenty years before Canada, that did accept the 1931 Statute immediately. Through these years, Ferguson unsavourily sets out one individual who continued to believe in the British Empire – Adolf Hitler, for his own evil strategic reasons of course. At the same time, Britain was neglecting its defences and military. Discussing WWII, Ferguson lauds Canada, noting that the Battle of Britain may have been lost had it not been for Canadian pilots (recall the Commonwealth Air Training Plan was based in Canada) and the Battle of the Atlantic would surely have been lost without the Canadian contribution. Part of Ferguson's description of the Second World War, though, is difficult to follow, except for readers very familiar with Second World War history. Past the two world wars, Ferguson hammers the ideologues who propagate the view that the end of the Empire came because of "freedom fighters" from Dublin to Delhi, riding themselves of colonial rule. The sacrificial end came, he explains, because the British Empire "did the right thing", regardless of cost, by taking up arms against truly evil Empires – Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and militaristic Japan. As a consequence, the heir of Britain's global power is its most successful colony, and not one of the Evil empires.

Approaching the end of his work, Ferguson deals adroitly with the complex relationship between Britain and the United States, explaining inherent

American hostility to empire. It is this that helps set up the conclusion, in which Ferguson cites the prescient words in the Fall of 1939 of Lord Tweedsmuir (John Buchan), Canada's Governor-General, that so effectively articulate Ferguson's theme of the transfer of power and global responsibility. "*There are on the globe only two proven large-scale organizations of social units, the United States and the British Empire. The latter is (no longer) for export ... But the United States ... is the supreme example of a federation in being ... If the world is ever to have prosperity and peace, there must be some kind of federation – I will not say of democracies, but of States which accept the reign of Law. In such a task (the United States) seems to me to be the predestined leader.*"

The United States, an empire that dares not speak its name, in Ferguson's words, is the heir of the British Empire, as offspring during the colonial period and today as successor.