

Britain's Declining Empire; The Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968

By Ronald Hyam. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. £17.99/ 464 pages)
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Ronald Hyam's *Britain's Declining Empire*, is one of those grand panoptic books which only a senior academic can write after a long study of the issues. Indeed this is one of those grand books which endeavours to embody and utilize the research of a generation.

The breadth of this book covers themes as varied as politics, religion, engineering and regions, including the far reaches of the British Empire. In order to address such a topic in just 410 pages of text, an author must be selective about what is included and just as importantly, what is excluded. The notable exclusions in this book are economic history, subaltern studies, and social movements. Hyam does not ignore these completely. He addresses these issues by answering his fundamentally political questions. He explains the paradigm which policy-makers had in the early twentieth century regarding economic and social policy. This is a largely political history with emphasis on the perspectives of both native leaders in the colonies and British policy-makers at Westminster.

The book takes the reader from a period when British policy makers thought of the empire as something to manage and to seek benefit from, to one where politicians made their marks by leading rapid decolonization efforts. One of the strengths of this book is the way the author presents this transition. Through a desert of policy uniformity and mountains of local uncertainty, Britain's ministers and subordinate officers made this shift in half a century. Hyam's descriptions of prime ministers' personalities, orientations and knowledge provide a vivid picture of the political climate in the back rooms of Parliament and No. 10. By so doing, he attempts to create a clearer picture of these men and of why and how they made their policy decisions. In the case of Winston Churchill, Hyam refutes popular historians who describe Churchill as racist and a fundamentally elitist character.

About Churchill, Hyam says, "...his official decisions about colonial issues were invariably geared towards compromise, reconciliation, and even-handed justice, however paternalistic the presentation might be. He was essentially a pragmatist who always asked what was feasible, and understood when to keep his private prejudices in check." (p.172) He reiterates this perception of Churchill's policies as pragmatic throughout the book. This supports his general thesis and he contrasts it with popular perceptions of Churchill as a (ironically self described) relentless defender of empire. He goes into some depth about the evident contradictions and offers his own compelling analysis which shows Churchill's policies did not reflect racism but were rather progressive.

After a long discussion of the Attlee government from 1945-1951 he arrives at the conclusion that the "Labour Ministers were essentially gradualists, who sought above all to remain in control of the process of granting self-government, a gradualism which was essential because they were determined to maintain as far as possible the structure of British global interests in the fight against communism." (p.170) Throughout the

aforementioned section, Hyam illustrates the text with amusing anecdotes, quotes and personality descriptions which put into perspective the negotiations and discussions held at the highest levels of governments.

Hyam explores the political battles in the colonies from the largest to the smallest. He discusses Egypt, Palestine and the Gold Coast, in some detail. He also addresses Malta, Aden and the West Indies in only slightly less detail. Though he carefully studied the smaller colonies, he brings things into proportion by strategic significance in later chapters. His focus on specific cases in different colonies and the corresponding Foreign Office, Colonial Office and ministerial responses is one of the major strengths of this book. It is useful as a high level overview of strategic issues related to decolonization throughout the empire, as well as in individual colonies. Perhaps this is its greatest value to readers. University students as well as those generally interested in the decline of empire will find this book quite interesting. By following the extensive footnotes containing commentary, one can gain a much deeper understanding of events, primarily from a strategic and political perspective.

Hyam is not afraid to correct what he considers wrong statements in previous publications. He points to the *Cambridge History of Africa's* assertion that “what was envisaged for the Gold Coast[,] was ‘Independence – perhaps in fifteen years’ time” and affirms that this was simply incorrect and even anachronistic. The book is full of assertions about the thoughts and motives of policy-makers which helps to illustrate the situations and perhaps also invites criticism. The author however has engaged with the literature for years, and suffers no lack of credibility. Thus he adds greatly to the richness of debate about the period in which the British Empire rapidly declined.

To put his themes in the construct of non-colonial countries, Hyam devotes some space to relations with the USA, the Commonwealth and the United Nations. This section deals with the later period of decolonization, when the UN called for dismantling the empire rapidly in the 1960s. Less detail is contained in this section about the personalities and intricacies of policy development, but it provides the necessary context for the dissolution of portions of the empire - a process which, with hindsight, some believe to have been premature. This section also addresses in more detail the anti-communist issue during the Cold War, which dramatically slowed British decolonization for security purposes.

Amid the reshaping of British policy and empire, was the South African departure from the Commonwealth. The section of the book which addresses this takes great pains to describe the meetings and positions which led to the emancipation of these colonies. The South African departure was based upon the new ideals of the decolonized, humanist, world and represented, as Hyam claims, the final ideological stage of the decolonization movement.

The final chapter, “We Could No Longer Afford to Honour Our Pledges” is a sort of potpourri of interesting issues that Hyam wanted to highlight before ending the book. The continuous story he tells is largely over before this chapter begins but the points made therein are nevertheless valuable. He addresses Britain’s new role in the world, the

Commonwealth and several particular ex-colonies in the context of their later issues. These include: Aden, the Falkland Islands, Rhodesia, Swaziland, and East of Suez.

The Epilogue is the most poetic chapter in the book. Here, Hyam describes vividly the individual ceremonies held when the British symbolically handed over power to freshly independent former colonies. He also makes some summary points about context and the nature of decolonization. He finally asserts the large claim that the process of British decolonization was defined by a speeding up of timetables, in a pragmatic way, rather than the creation of brand new plans.

The book claims to deal with the period 1918-1968, but it is probably more useful for those interested in the period delineated by the beginning of World War II and the end of the late 1960s. Hyam's work is both accessible for general readers and for scholars by encompassing a vast body of work which illuminates the study of the end of empire and the role played by British politicians.

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