



## The Review

### Reappraising British Imperialism

*Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*, by Nigel Biggar, London: William Collins, 2023, 496 pages, hardcover.

A lot of what we know — or think we know — just isn't so. Still, there are schools of thought that reiterate such supposed verities in so many ways and fashions that it can muddle minds.

The subject at hand directs its aim at the messages delivered from the anti-colonialist regents who exercise the ruling power in most of modern academe. They have handed down their revealed wisdom — rewriting history toward that end — which is then echoed through their minions in governments, prestigious universities, and mass-media outlets.

Here are several of the officially endorsed views about British imperialism: It was largely driven by greed and the lust to dominate, colonialism is equivalent to slavery, the British Empire was essentially racist, it was guilty of genocide, economic exploitation was fundamentally the motive, it was illegitimate because it wasn't "democratic" and served British rather than native interests, and the empire's violence was pervasively racist and terroristic.

Those are the main targets of the author. He riddles them with well-placed shots of hard evidence.

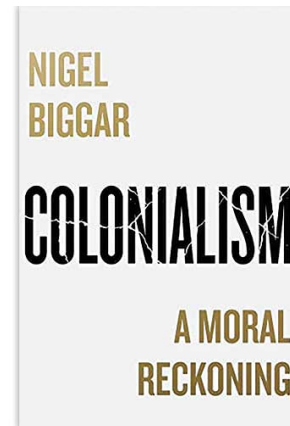
While filled with historical particulars, the book — as the author stresses — is not a "history" of the British Empire; rather, it is a "moral evaluation" of it. Don't think that means the volume is an abstruse thumb-sucker: There are plenty of facts and figures, battles and deaths, assessments and learned outlooks of various historians and authorities — as well as 130 or so pages of endnotes (where the author concentrates on his "skirmishes" with some historians) before one gets to the extensive bibliography and valuable index.

Our ignorance of history makes us vilify our own, as Flaubert observed. We surely don't crave more of that. What we do need are more balanced analyses.

The author says the telling of his more accurate, fairer, and more positive story is vital because what is at stake is "the self-perception" and self-confidence of the British today. What we have here is an antidote — in other words, exactly what the anti-colonialists don't want people to hear.

### Ethicist Gets Drafted Into Imperial History War

The author of *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* is Nigel Biggar. He doesn't call himself an historian; he's an ethicist. He is regius professor of moral and pastoral theology at the University of Oxford, and director of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics & Public Life. Biggar has degrees from Oxford, Regent College, and the University of Chicago.





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In his telling, there were many and various reasons why the British built an empire — including to be “trader, migrant, soldier, missionary, entrepreneur, financier, government official and statesman.” In other words, it’s a complicated historical mosaic. The reasons, not surprisingly, “differed between London, Cairo, Cape Town and Calcutta,” with the dominating reasons changing from one time to another.

There’s a relevant backstory for this volume. Biggar credits its writing, indirectly, to Bruce Gilley for an article that Gilley wrote titled “The Case for Colonialism.” Already in the cancel mob’s sights for what were deemed impolitic remarks during the “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign in Oxford, Biggar also had the nerve to write approvingly about Gilley’s views in an article in London’s *Times* in November 2017. Imagine! The horrors! The professor argues that “we British have reason to feel pride as well as shame about our imperial past. Note: pride *as well as shame*.” (Emphasis in original.)

Within a week, recalls Biggar, “all hell broke loose, and I found myself plunged into the ‘culture war’ over colonialism.” Among other assaults, he was denounced by 58 colleagues at Oxford, then by “two hundred academics from around the world. For a fortnight, my name was in the press every day.” He had “stumbled, blindly,” as the author relates, “into the Imperial History War.”

There are parts of the record that we’re apparently supposed to overlook. It’s clearly fitting to examine the ugly practice of slavery — but what came next? “After a century and a half of transporting slaves to the West Indies and the American colonies, the British abolished both the trade and the institution within the empire in the early 1800s.” And what happened then is also pertinent, as Biggar tells it: The British “spent the subsequent century and a half exercising their imperial power in deploying the Royal Navy to stop slave ships crossing the Atlantic and Indian oceans, and in suppressing the Arab slave trade across Africa.”

**Nigel Biggar** (Wikipedia/Elekes Andor)



## Honesty About Slavery and Anti-slavery

An early chapter (“From Slavery to Anti-Slavery”) demonstrates its importance to the thesis. Other chapters tackle anti-colonialist pompous proclamations with clear-eyed perspective and reasoning, as opposed to assertions that portray the imperial world as completely covered with warts. The names of several chapters hint at the range covered: “Human Equality, Cultural Superiority and ‘Racism’”;



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“Land, Settlers and ‘Conquest’”; “Cultural Assimilation and ‘Genocide’”; “Free Trade, Investment and ‘Exploitation’”; “Government, Legitimacy and Nationalism”; and “Justified Force and ‘Pervasive Violence.’”

Lest we forget, the practice of slavery was both ancient and universal. And it’s not just a white and black issue. The rundown cited here may seem extensive, but it is just an excerpt, a condensation of much more in *Colonialism*. Across the globe, we are reminded,

societies have employed forced labour in agriculture, mining, public works and even as troops. All the ancient Mesopotamian civilisations practiced slavery in one form or another, starting with Egypt in the third millennium BC. To the west, around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the ancient Greeks, Carthaginians and Romans followed. To the east, slavery could be found among the Chinese from at least the seventh century AD, and subsequently among the Japanese and Koreans. In the Americas, the peoples on the northern Pacific coast practiced it from before the sixth century AD, the Incas and the Aztecs extracted forced labour from subject people from the fifteenth century, and the Comanches ran a slave economy from the eighteenth century.

These, of course, are not secrets — even if they are widely and selectively secreted from many modern curricula.

Biggar continues. From the time of Muhammad forward, “Slavery was practiced throughout the Islamic world. In the eighth and ninth centuries the Vikings supplied slave markets in Arab Spain and Egypt with slaves — *white* slaves — from eastern Europe and the British Isles.” (Emphasis in original.)

Barbary pirates even raided English ships and villages in Cornwall and West Cork for slaves. Per one estimate, the author recounts, the overall Muslim slave trade, “which lasted until 1920, transported about 17 million slaves, mostly African, exceeding by a considerable margin the approximately 11 million shipped by Europeans across the Atlantic.”

Beyond that, there are the long centuries in which Africans enslaved other Africans. And, even beyond that, there are those who were supplied for human sacrifice.

This is not a fairy tale. The roots of evil are planted very deeply.

## **Sovereignty and Treaty-making**

When it comes to disparaging the conquests of the British Empire, frequently portrayed baldly these days as just the violating of native peoples to gain land, there are actually thorny issues to deal with. Ethicist Biggar does address them. It gets knottier when members of different societies encounter each other for the first time.

First, though, he knocks down a claim that (for example) “First Nations” in North America were generally able to come to peaceful arrangements in such instances. He calls that “fanciful,” saying perhaps too politely that it “softens the historical record.” With proofs to the contrary listed, he rebuts in detail, showing the evidence of incidents of the “conquest, absorption, displacement, and even extermination” that were routine. In the southwestern part of North America, Biggar notes,



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the Comanches launched “an explosive expansion”, which in three generations obliterated Apache civilization from the Great Plains and carved out “a vast territory that was larger than the entire European-controlled area north of the Rio Grande at the time”. From 1750 to 1850 their empire dominated the region, building “the largest slave economy in the colonial Southwest”. Meanwhile, to the north, in the second half of the sixteenth century the Iroquois were displaced from the St. Lawrence valley by the Algonquian-speaking Montagnais, but then returned in the seventeenth century, reconquered it and expanded west as far as present-day Illinois; in the eighteenth century the Ojibwa also pushed west into what are now Minnesota and Dakota; and in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the Cree moved onto the prairies and encountered the Blackfoot, who were being pushed north and east by other tribes.

There is similar recounting of the treatment of and by the Māori in New Zealand and concerning various tribes in South Africa (among others).

The author does overstep, or understate, in some of his contentions about certain imperial gains being justified because treaty agreements were involved. In talking about the Ndebele in South Africa, and their king, Lobengula, he writes about the man acting on behalf of Cecil Rhodes’ British South Africa Company (BSAC). Biggar says (variously) that Charles Rudd “may have been less than scrupulous” or “economical with the truth” about the concessions involved.

One gathers that the march of civilization can be slow because certain folks get out of step. In the larger picture, the Ndebele may have more to answer for than some dissembling directed at them. In fact, as we read in *Colonialism*, the lands that were occupied by

the Ndebele in the 1890s they themselves had seized by conquest about fifty years before, having broken off from the militaristic Zulu empire and migrating westward to found their own “militarized state”, scattering other African people before them. The Shona, whose lands they occupied, were reduced to the status of vassals, subject to indiscriminate torture, slaughter and laying waste upon failure to pay tribute.

Nonetheless, Biggar does acknowledge that a number of land transfers did involve misunderstandings about the agreements. And, as American Indians found out, some treaties were kept; others were broken. However, maintains the author, even “a broken treaty can provide the ground for legal remedy — as the Treaty of Waitangi [signed with 540 Māori chiefs in 1840] has been doing in New Zealand since 1975.”

## **Belligerency Scorecard**

*Colonialism* has a lot to say, with much to commend it. When it comes to ethics, the author makes it clear that he does believe all human beings are basically equal. Yet, he is equally certain that belief does not imply that all cultures are equal. If you haven’t been on a college campus recently, be aware: Saying that out loud or in print shows mettle. He gives examples of cultures that are not equal in a technical respect and in an intellectual respect. Similarly, a “culture that abhors human sacrifice to the gods and female infanticide is superior *in that moral respect* to one that practises them.” (Emphasis in



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original.)

One strong area of *Colonialism* is where Biggar dissects in some length a half-dozen instances of “imperial belligerency that have become infamous.” The six in question: The massacre of Amritsar in the Punjab of 1919, the First Opium War of 1839-1842, the repression of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the military takeover of Benin City in West Africa in 1897 (there’s a full 20 pages of this), the “Second Anglo-Boer War” in South Africa of 1899-1902, and the counter-insurgency against the Mau Mau rebellions in Kenya in East Africa in the 1950s.

For those scoring, the author registers his findings: He terms the British decision to wage the First Opium War unjustified; two are termed justified (Second Anglo-Boer War and Benin expedition). Biggar points to instances of “disproportionate and indiscriminate use of violence” in the Indian Mutiny, Amritsar, and early days of the Kenya emergency. And in the Anglo-Boer War, he finds an “instance of culpable negligence in the administration of ‘camps of refuge.’”

It takes an honest and intrepid professor and author to provide a tally of the evils of British colonialism as well as those items that deserve to be in the credit column. Nigel Biggar is not afraid to go out on a limb. That’s where the fruit is.



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