

London, 2011

‘You’re a Brit, aren’t you?’ It wasn’t an accusation. His face was welcoming, even slightly joyous, and approximately nine feet away from mine. I couldn’t smell his breath despite best efforts. I was sitting uncomfortably on a long upholstered seat embedded in a charmless alcove somewhere near Northern Ireland. The antagonist was alone – I could have simply walked out, but that wouldn’t quite work. This is how it begins, I thought, starting to forwardly imagine the warm caress of late summer: a gas-filled impasse in my modest BMW. Bliss, you might think. It all ends, however, with some postmodern wanker turning up to your funeral in an ironic T-shirt which reads: ‘BLACK TIE’. Or worse.

It was fine, of course. The bloke wasn’t even talking to me and I had generated sufficient inspiration for a false memory trite enough to open the new book. When the commercial arm of the BBC demanded a word accompaniment to go alongside the publicly-funded television jaunt I had already ventured on, it had been easy to forget the frankly fucking terrible slog it is to write something even passable to an admittedly generous deadline. Sure, the critics may describe my narration as ‘episodic’ (the eight-month stay in the Maharaja Palace was fine, thanks) and my analysis as ‘superficial’, but no one gives a toss about Rusbridger or any bastard that works for him. By this point, anyway, I was onto to yet another literary bestseller. I underline this statement four times – like a deranged, sexless government whip – indicating material for *Paxman: Unabridged*.

Empire! I think of the subjugation, oppression and genocide. I think of Evan Davis, nailed to a wall, entirely hollowed out and stuffed with sag aloo; the cacophonous noise of my pitiless contempt echoing around his beanbag of a head. I write the words: ‘No one has much to say about empire’, ignoring the wealth of contemporary literature on the subject. I am pleased by this acute sleight-of-hand. I take the remainder of the day off assured in the knowledge that Niall Ferguson hasn’t actually written anything original in fifteen years, the ugly fraud.

A light amble brings fresh perspective. One must manage a balance in tone. British Empire was bad. But not the worst? Notepad leaves pocket: ‘If you had to live under a foreign government...’ and the rest, conveniently, writes itself. The British handled the tide of postwar state self-determination in a generally peaceful manner. The fact we Brits were sympathetic, understanding and ultimately banal in our despotism is both nuanced and funny. How do I articulate my self-titillating, mocking raised eyebrow in words? Things or people I disagree with: describe them as ‘nonsense’. Why justify or explain when you can dismiss concepts outright and let a subeditor meat out the rest later? Easier than the life of a British colonial administrator.

The publisher calls. ‘Jeremy, this book needs a particular angle. Your broad brushstrokes and suspect handling of material are not sufficient in what is an extremely competitive commercial environment.’ I laugh heartily down the phone, make an indecipherable plop with my mouth, and fling the wedge of plastic by my ear into the Thames. That smug new Tory has really got to them, I muse in a far less articulate manner than suggested. I say something about ‘bloody quotas’ and idly make my way past another semi-famous London landmark I am unable to specify for fear of describing an impossible geographical route. An idea strikes me: let’s turn the

critical eye inwards. What did ruling the world do to US! That will silence those prepubescent bores at Viking. I hastily ambush a passerby in order to leave a voicemail for the early-years toddler group: 'I have a subtitle.' I mumble passively, knowing really that my idea is absolutely fantastic and if I see Max Hastings now I will guffaw till my nose falls off.

I do not count on having to elaborate upon this unique perspective. Dread courses through me, fondling my ego with excessive prurience, prodding and deflating my sense of self. Grasping madly, I settle on saying as little as possible about the Empire's effect on the British. I will simply suggest that, in the main, we were damn proper and correct with our subjects. The movement for the abolition of slavery: good old-fashioned moral paternalism. Will ignore any evidence which infers that there were economic advantages for the British in regard to abolition. Will champion altruism over self-interest as the root cause. Will project a view of the Empire which is more Kipling than Orwell. Will ultimately say nothing new, and produce little resembling critical engagement.

Will remind Don Nutbeam that he owes me a favour.