

Jeremy Paxman: Empire, What ruling the world did to the British

Jeremy Paxman has taken on an enormous task in attempting to explore the narrative of the British Empire in one short book. In many ways it is not at all a piece of conventional history. It reads like a series of sometimes amusing, sometimes tragic, imperial anecdotes which have been fitted into a framework of insightful comments about modern day Britain. To any Imperial historian familiar with the work of John Rule, Paxman seems far too intentionalist - with great figures paving the way of Britain's road to Imperial dominance.¹ That said, his overall message is well conveyed: Britain must remember its past before it can realise its future. Paxman states that 'we think we know what the British Empire did to the world' and then moves on to his real point about what the Empire did to the British people.² However, the implications of the British Empire have not yet been fully realised.

Catherine Hall has said that the 'disavowal of the past is an active process' and in this sense she somewhat colludes with Paxman in his aim to spread an awareness of how the British Empire was formed.³ Paxman launches straight into describing the transatlantic slave trade in terms of 'opulence built on misery', and also concludes that the abolitionist movement 'gave the British Empire a vital moral purpose'.⁴ Paxman portrays this 'moral purpose' as being intrinsically linked to a prevailing sense of religious righteousness and a zeitgeist of philanthropy. This idealistic view is almost the antithesis to what Eric Williams proposes in *Capitalism and Slavery*, in which the abolition movement is scrutinised with a cynical eye. According to Williams the importance of humanitarian intervention has been 'seriously misunderstood and grossly exaggerated by men who have sacrificed scholarship to sentimentality'.⁵ Williams also suggests that the abolition movement could not have succeeded without the backing from metropolitan businessmen who were fearful of the West Indies' growing monopoly on British commerce.⁶

Furthermore, the prevalence of racially constructed prejudice is one that cannot be confined to history books. Paxman is right to ascertain that British Imperialism must be understood in its brutal context of subjugation. Unfortunately Paxman does not elaborate on the raging anthropological debates that dominated the scientific scene of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Notably, anthropologists such as Octave Mannoni and Charles Seligman, conspired to consolidate the place of the white colonialist in modern society through the formulation of the Prospero Complex and the Hamitic Hypothesis respectively.⁷ Frantz Fanon, born with Afro-French citizenship in Martinique, launched a strong resistance against European colonial machinations and exposed the subversion of culture that was rife in the colonies.⁸ Fanon wholly rejected Octave Mannoni's theory that the

¹ John Rule, *Albion's People: English Society 1714-1815* (London: Longman, 1992).

² Jeremy Paxman, *Empire: What Ruling the World Did the British* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p 3.

³ Catherine Hall, 'Britain's massive debt to slavery', *The Guardian*, 27/02/2013.

<<http://www.theguardian.com>> [accessed 27/02/2015, 13:04].

⁴ Paxman, pp 24-29.

⁵ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery: New Introduction by Colin A. Palmers* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p 135.

⁶ Williams, p 178.

⁷ Octave Mannoni, trans. by Pamela Powelsand, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonisation*, (New York: Praeger, 1964)

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* () p. 23.

subjugated African population welcomed white colonizers as the 'long awaited master', ready to fill the void of their innate dependency complex.⁹ Fanon, having to formulate a response to this ardent racism in the mid twentieth century, reveals that sentiments of equity had not permeated into post-abolitionist societies.

Paxman frames the demise of the British Empire's influence in the Middle East around the events of the Suez Crisis of 1956: 'the crisis which gave the British Empire its fatal wound'¹⁰. The failure of Anthony Eden to secure British Imperial interests abroad was certainly a defining moment in Imperial history, but the interference of Western powers in Middle Eastern affairs has not been forgotten. In 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi issued a statement that the Islamic State terrorist group is staunchly opposed to the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. The motives for Baghdadi's attack on a treaty that occurred nearly one hundred years ago reveal that the lingering effects of Western Imperialism are being seized upon to incite hatred in the Middle East. However, the importance of Sykes-Picot cannot be overlooked because, as Malise Ruthven states: 'it stands near the beginning of what many Arabs view as a sequence of Western betrayals spanning from the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire in World War I to the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.'¹¹ Thus, Baghdadi aligns himself with anti-imperialism in much the same way as Muhammad al-Ahmad did when declared himself Mahdi and drove the British from the Sudan in 1885. Paxman only touches upon this issue, despite the fact that contemporary media cannot stop reporting on radical Islam - often to the point of demonising an entire ethnicity because of their religious affiliations.¹²

The 'othering' of various ethnicities was an intrinsic part of Empire building and there are undeniable parallels between the anti-Catholic propaganda that helped form the British Empire and the twisted British nationalism that has gained increasing amounts of media coverage. Paxman, who lists Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation* in his bibliography, was undoubtedly aware that British identity was related to the fear and hatred of foreign religions.¹³ However, Paxman's work has clearly been well researched and he makes the parameters of his work clear. Furthermore, his work has been crafted together very effectively to ensure that his readers are not overwhelmed by the huge amount of material covered and the inclusion of neo-Imperialism would have made for a much more complex read. Other than this, Paxman's account of abolition and the process of enslavement would have certainly benefited from expansion.

Word Count: 871

⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁰ Paxman, p 264.

¹¹ Malise Ruthven, 'The Map ISIS Hates', *The New York Review of Books*, 25/06/2014 <<http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/jun/25/map-isis-hates/>> [accessed 26/02/2015, 12:29].

¹² Julian Robinson, 'ISIS thugs take a hammer to civilisation...!', *Daily Mail Online*, 26/02/2015 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2970270/>> & Julian Robinson, "'Oh dear mother, they are chanting Allahu Akbar!": Footage recorded by terrified Iraqis as they see a convoy coming towards their home... and realise it is ISIS', *Daily Mail Online*, 27/02/2015 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2971818/>> & 'Charia Hebdo', *Charlie Hebdo* No. 1011, 03/11/2011 & Asma Ajroudi, 'Charlie Hebdo Attack: A turning point for Islamophobia in France?', *Al Arabiya News*, 10/01/2015 <<http://english.alarabiya.net>>.

¹³ Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707-1837*, (London: Pimlico, 2003) pp19-30.

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