



## Review: The Empire Strikes Back

Reviewed Work(s):

*British Imperialism* by P. J. Cain; A. G. Hopkins  
David Cannadine

*Past and Present*, No. 147. (May, 1995), pp. 180-194.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-2746%28199505%290%3A147%3C180%3ATESB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>

*Past and Present* is currently published by Oxford University Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/oup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

### III

Such is Cain and Hopkins's account of the rise and fall of the British Empire, and no praise can be too high for the skill with which it is unfolded and sustained across more than eight hundred pages of text. They seem to have read everything that is germane to the subject; they are as well-informed about Britain as they are about the Empire; and they have mastered the specialist literature on Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India, as well as that on China, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. Only Ireland, the West Indies and south-east Asia have escaped their attention. Moreover, they write with uncommon grace and style; they are never overwhelmed by the mass of material; and the organization is admirable throughout. In a subject where detailed knowledge has increased at the cost of diminishing general comprehension, this prodigious labour of scholarship and

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 265-96.

learning, synthesis and argument, is a landmark in its breadth of vision, and its boldness of spirit. It will be essential reading for anyone interested in the history of Britain, of the British Empire, or of any of the separate nations which were once part of it. We may live in a post-colonial world, but thanks to Cain and Hopkins, the British Empire has struck back with a vengeance.

But have they got it right? Any argument which covers so long a span of time, and ranges over so broad a geographical area, is going to provoke dissent. One problem which runs right through these volumes is the inadequate treatment of Britain's manufacturing economy. The authors seem convinced that many imperial historians argued that the Industrial Revolution made the British Empire both necessary and possible. Yet they can cite very few reputable scholars who have ever maintained such a crude and simplistic view. Moreover, their own argument that the Industrial Revolution was a very limited, piecemeal affair draws heavily on the findings of a particularly myopic phase in the historiography of that subject which now seems to be coming to an end.<sup>22</sup> It is also not clear that the industrial sector of the economy can be separated from the financial-service sector as conveniently, completely or convincingly as their analysis requires. After all, much of the banking, the shipping and the insurance which formed a substantial part of Britain's so-called "invisible" earnings existed to facilitate international trade in British manufactured goods, and in the raw materials which were imported to make their production possible. Domestic industry and overseas finance were complementary not competing.

Put another way, this also means that there are real difficulties with the idea of "gentlemanly capitalism", a concept so vague that it is in danger of losing any real explanatory power. Assuredly, there may never have been a coherent, monolithic industrial interest in Britain. But nor did the financial-service sector speak with one single voice. "The City" was never the unified lobby that the authors' argument requires it to have been: it was a bewilderingly diverse place, in which the few great dynasties like the Rothschilds and Barings were quite untypical

<sup>22</sup> D. Cannadine, "The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution, 1880-1980", *Past and Present*, no. 103 (May 1984); M. Berg and P. Hudson, "Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xlv (1992).

of the whole.<sup>23</sup> Nor is it clear that there were close and constant connections between financiers and government in the formulation of imperial policy: they may all have been to the same public schools, and have been members of the same clubs, but as the authors coyly admit on more than one occasion, the City was in many ways “above politics”.<sup>24</sup> And we are never told what it was that drove these “gentlemanly capitalists” abroad to begin with: the authors briefly mention that greater profits were to be made, but they do not develop the idea. In short, the concept of “gentlemanly capitalism” suffers from the same problems as that of the “official mind”: it is an arresting phrase which does not stand up well to sceptical scrutiny.

There is also the question, which the authors do not choose to explore, of how it was that *English* gentlemen made the *British* Empire. This is more than a matter of mere pedantry: for there never has been such a thing as a “British” gentleman, nor such an institution as the “English” Empire. The reason that the Empire was British was that many of the people who made it and governed it were not English at all, but came from Wales, Ireland and Scotland. Cardiff exported its coals (and its miners) all over the world. The Scottish were especially important in the affairs of Canada and India. And so were (and are) the Irish in Australia: ask Paul Keating. Such figures, many of whom can hardly be described, incidentally, as “gentlemanly capitalists”, do not fit easily into the Cain-Hopkins scheme of things. In the same way, different parts of England forged close ties with the Empire, that were independent of London — especially Lancashire, Tyneside and Birmingham. Viewed from the south-east, the Empire may seem like the creation of “gentlemanly capitalist” insiders. But if the perspective is shifted to northern England or the rest of the British Isles, the creators of the Empire assume very different national (and social) identities. Many of them were outsiders, who saw the Empire as a means of self-advancement, and they made it British — not English — in the process.<sup>25</sup>

To these conceptual difficulties must be added problems of chronology. Cain and Hopkins’s account (and explanation) of the

<sup>23</sup> M. J. Daunton, “‘Gentlemanly Capitalism’ and British Industry, 1820-1914”, *Past and Present*, no. 122 (Feb. 1989); D. Kynaston, *The City of London*, vol. i, *A World of its Own, 1815-1890* (London, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, i, p. 408.

<sup>25</sup> L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 117-32.

different phases of imperial expansion is insufficiently nuanced. The years from 1688 to 1850 are treated very schematically, and occupy scarcely fifty pages of text. For much of this period, Britain was indeed a pre-industrial nation, and the authors might have strengthened their case considerably if they had explored the drive to Empire more fully in the seventy-odd years following the "Glorious Revolution". Nor does their interpretation of the period after 1776 entirely convince. For it seems clear that there was a real change in the nature of the imperial dynamic at this time, partly in response to the loss of the American colonies, partly because of the Industrial Revolution, and partly because of the increased rivalry between the British and the French. As a result, the conquest of large tracts of India during the 1790s and 1800s seem to have occurred for a variety of reasons which were very different from those which had led to expansion earlier in the Empire's history.<sup>26</sup> And we never learn how it was that the British became entangled in the affairs of New Zealand, Canada or South Africa at around this time, or why people (surely not "gentlemanly capitalists"?) began to emigrate there.

In fact, the book only really gets going when it reaches the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the era of the so-called "New Imperialism", the "Scramble for Africa", and the massive expansion in Britain's overseas investments. But here, too, there are difficulties with an interpretation which treats Empire as little more than the by-product of metropolitan financial expansion. It is easy to see why the British were involved in Egypt and South Africa, but what of the vast tracts of the continent they annexed in between? In the same way, the British government seems to have been much more interested in the affairs of the Ottoman and Chinese Empires than were British investors, which hardly conforms to the authors' general thesis. Perhaps it was because of the growing rivalries among the great powers of Europe, a subject to which Cain and Hopkins give insufficient attention. Moreover, they are far too eager to write off the consequences of Britain's perceived (and undoubted) late nineteenth-century industrial retardation. For all the pomp and circumstance of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee of 1897, British policy-makers were genuinely worried that the country was being overtaken.

<sup>26</sup> J. R. Ward, "The Industrial Revolution and British Imperialism, 1750-1850", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xlvii (1994); C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London, 1989).

And it was, after all, that former manufacturer turned politician, Joseph Chamberlain, a man who was the very antithesis of a “gentlemanly capitalist”, who believed passionately that industrial leadership, imperial connection and great power status were, for Britain, inextricably interlinked.<sup>27</sup>

It is also not clear how far the survival of the British Empire during the interwar years, and its disappearance soon after, can — or should — be explained in terms which must be consistent with the explanation offered by Cain and Hopkins about how it came into existence in the first place. The continuing importance, during the 1920s and 1930s, of British investment and of colonial indebtedness, seems clear: but was this all that was holding the Empire together at this time? And when it comes to explaining the end of Empire, the authors admit that economic change has to take its place alongside other forces: the decline of British power, the rising costs of imperial administration and defence, the loss of the imperial will and sense of mission, the irresistible force of colonial nationalism, and the pressures of international opinion, including the United States. This is an impressive and salutary list. But it does prompt this subversive thought: if a multicausal explanation seems to fit for imperial decline, why should it be inappropriate for imperial expansion?

#### IV

Despite the prodigious labours that have gone into the making of these two remarkable volumes, their essential argument can be reduced to one simple sentence: namely, that “finance” was the “governor of the imperial engine”.<sup>28</sup> This has, of course, been said before, by J. A. Hobson, and it is surely no coincidence that P. J. Cain has for some years been actively engaged in seeking to rehabilitate Hobson as the pre-eminent theorist of imperialism.<sup>29</sup> For it was Hobson who first drew attention to the difference

<sup>27</sup> For the most recent and authoritative study along these lines, see P. T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (New Haven, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, i, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> P. J. Cain, “International Trade and Economic Development in the Work of J. A. Hobson before 1914”, *History Polit. Economy*, xi (1979); P. J. Cain, “J. A. Hobson, Financial Capitalism and Imperialism in Late Victorian and Edwardian England”, *Jl Imperial and Commonwealth Hist.*, xiii (1985); P. J. Cain, “Variations on a Famous Theme: Hobson, International Trade and Imperialism, 1902-38”, in M. Freedon (ed.), *Reappraising J. A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare* (London, 1990); P. J. Cain, “Hobson Lives? Finance and British Imperialism, 1870-1914”, in S. Groenveld and M. Wintle (eds.), *State and Trade: Government and the Economy in Britain and the Netherlands since the Middle Ages* (Zutphen, 1992).

between the “industrial” north of England and the more dominant “financial” south; it was Hobson who was convinced that the occupation of Egypt and the waging of the Boer War were undertaken to safeguard British assets overseas; and it was Hobson who argued, much more subtly than Lenin, that overseas investment was the key to Empire. For a long time Hobson was, along with Lenin, one of the whipping-boys of those who sought to dismiss the economic theory of imperialism. Ninety years after Hobson wrote his book, he has now received, at the hands of Cain and Hopkins, a sort of posthumous vindication. For it is difficult to believe that a more comprehensive and compelling study of the economic dynamics to Empire will ever be produced.

Yet the very magnitude of their accomplishment only serves to underline the limitations intrinsic to such an enterprise. Like Hobson, these volumes are too preoccupied with the age of “High Imperialism” from the 1870s to the First World War, and give insufficient attention to what went before. Like Hobson, the analysis is excessively monocausal, and gives inadequate weight to the many other explanations for Empire — not just political-diplomatic-strategic, but also religious, humanitarian, ideological and cultural. Like Hobson, the approach is too much concerned with the imperial metropolis, and the authors do not convince when they seek to dismiss approaches to their subject which stress the autonomous impulses emanating from the periphery. Like Hobson, Cain and Hopkins fail to recognize the extent to which the Empire was always an imaginative construct, existing as much (or more) inside the minds of men and women as it existed on the ground and on the map. In short, this work demonstrates not only the strengths, but also the weaknesses, of adopting an approach to the history of British overseas expansion which, for all its unrivalled mastery of recent scholarship, is in many ways extremely traditional. The Empire has struck back, not once, but twice.