

Understanding the British Empire by Ronald Hyam

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Ronald Hyam is one of the leading historians on the British Empire and his latest publication, *Understanding the British Empire*, will spark debate and is therefore a 'must-read' for those researching this topic. The author encourages discussion through two approaches: Hyam explores and builds upon current debates on the British Empire whilst also focusing on neglected areas within the leading historiography. Ultimately, this book has two primary aims. Firstly, to underline that the empire was built, organised and eventually dismantled because of a variety of factors. These factors include ethics, religion, significant individuals Hyam labels, 'Great Men', and international and domestic politics. The underlying intent of these topics is to move away from the economic determinant argument. The second aim is to introduce the concept that relationships between local people and British personnel were existent on different levels. Overall, the topically wide-ranging essays of this book convey the colourful past of the empire, which Hyam describes as going beyond the 'metropolis' and towards the 'periphery' (p.2).

The chapter titled 'Sexuality' offers itself as the most intriguing section of this book. This topic within the context of the British Empire is largely ignored by historians. It is cursorily acknowledged that some British personnel were involved sexually with the local population and furthermore, that some British personnel had sexual

relations with teenage boys. Arguably, this could explain why historians shy away from this subject, given the controversy that surrounds it. Nevertheless, Hyam investigates sex and the empire in full historical detail, offering a new angle for the reader to contemplate. Hyam achieves this by investigating how the British Empire was managed within a context of sexual desire or drive. For example, the author considers the British Army and their sexual encounters with the inhabitants of India. Hyam states that the army recognised that they could not prevent their officers from partaking in these sexual relations. Thus, the measures that were introduced to prevent the spread of disease between the British soldier and the Indian inhabitant are explored. Furthermore, what really adds to this chapter is the paradox created with the Christian missionary perception that traditionally runs alongside the British Empire. The missionaries are considered in a separate chapter but Hyam also explores those 'fallen' missionaries in his 'Sexuality' chapter, which makes an interesting read.

In considering Hyam's exploration of those topics that have traditionally received more focus, one of the significant topics is that of international politics. The author directly challenges the economic stance put forward by P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins and their 'Gentlemanly Capitalism' argument. Hyam stresses that it is important not to become too caught up in the Neo-Marxist interpretation, by directly rejecting Cain and Hopkins's argument that economics is the primary factor in understanding the British Empire. To challenge this, Hyam underlines the principles of *laissez-faire* that dominated the British government's ideology while the British Empire stood strong. Furthermore, Hyam also considers the 'Scramble out of Africa', where the focus is on geopolitics, not

economics. He argues that the context of the Cold War influenced Britain to sacrifice their empire to gain allies against the Soviet Union. The other chapters consider the areas of ethics, religion, the internal workings of the British government and specific individuals and their role within the empire. Individually, these chapters provide a unique input to understanding the empire but collectively they also support the argument that economics is not the single factor that explains the British Empire.

As well as presenting opportunities for future research on new and current debates, Hyam provides 'new' researchers with the essential starting tools for historical investigation. The author dedicates a whole chapter to the leading historiography on the British Empire and provides a bibliography at the end of each chapter for further reading. Furthermore, the extensive use of primary sources not only conveys a thoroughness and professionalism that is admirable but underlines the availability of primary sources to the reader. However, it is important to note that the rich detail on each topic suggests that this book is not intended for those who desire a light read that provides a general introduction on the British Empire.

An area that could have been investigated further is the role of British women. When discussing the theme of bureaucracy Hyam states: 'They [the bureaucrats] were almost entirely male, though we should not forget the pioneering women' (p.211). Unfortunately, the author only dedicates a page (p.274-5) to discussing British women. The word 'discussion' is used here in the broadest sense, as Hyam does mention the pioneer Mary Fisher but in the shadow of her husband, John Sloman Bennett. Nevertheless, this fleeting overview of Fisher's career is an improvement on Eleanor Emery, who, in a

token gesture, has her name mentioned once. In a historical topic where men dominate the spheres of decision making, management or implementation, women are often ignored or, as in this case, mentioned momentarily. This attempt to 'not forget the pioneering women' within the context of the British Empire is unsatisfactory and is something that could be addressed by future historians.

Despite this oversight, the studies conducted are informative, interesting, engaging and the professionalism conveyed in this book cannot be ignored. *Understanding the British Empire* provides extensive evidence to support the argument that historians should not focus exclusively on economics when investigating how the British Empire was built, organised and dismantled. Each topic provides a unique input but collectively they also put into question the economic determination argument. It can be surmised that rekindling a heated debate within this field was Hyam's underlying aim. Future researchers are provided the tools, such as identification of primary and secondary sources and an introduction to other leading historiographies, to initiate their own investigation that could support or dispute the arguments put forward by the author. Given this, it can be supposed that the author is looking forward to the forthcoming reaction to this text.