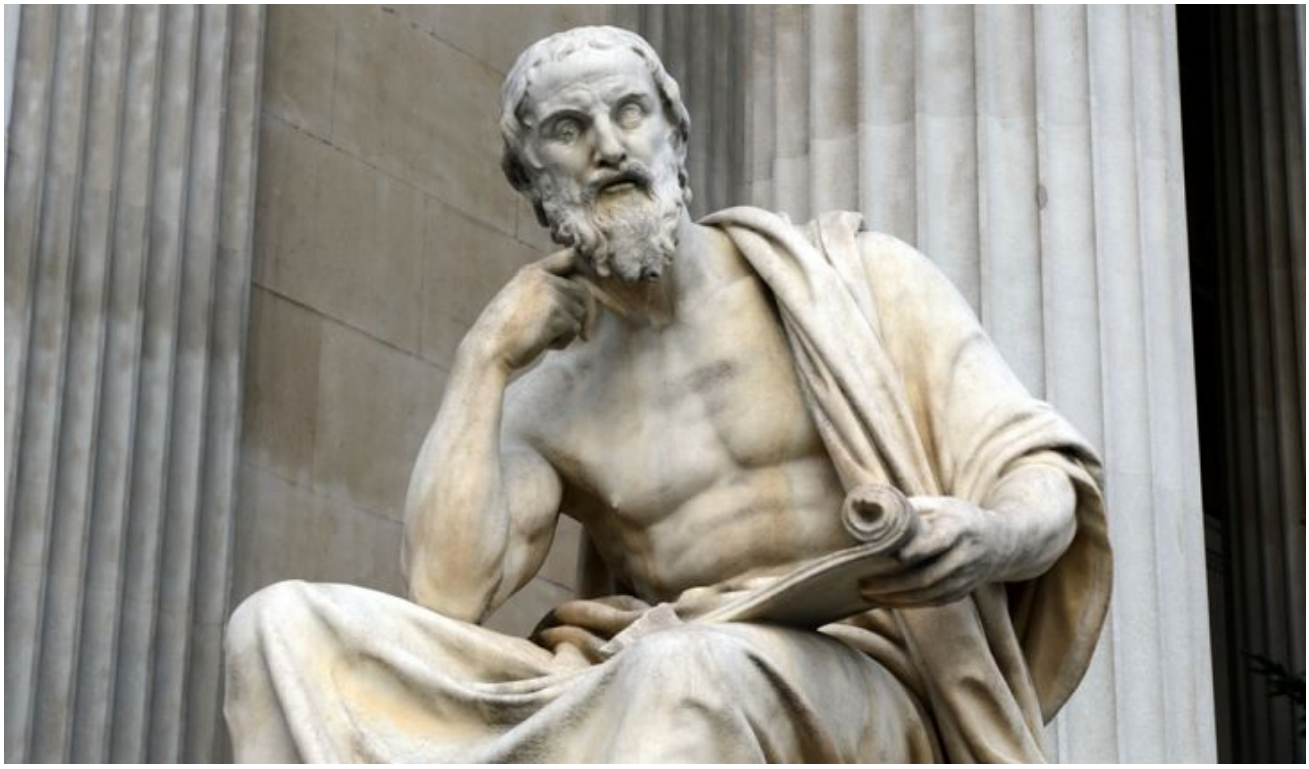
In Empire’s Wake

by Theodore Dalrymple



The totally disinterested historian who is curious about the past only for its own sake and has no axe to grind, no ideological preconceptions to reinforce by the use of selective evidence, and no policy prescription that he advocates with the support of supposedly historical precedent or analogy, must be a rare creature indeed. This is not to say that there are not varying degrees of historical *parti pris*, from the muted to the megaphonic. For myself, I think we live in a megaphonic age in which shrill historiography is the rule rather than the exception, and history is a means by which present-day resentments are aroused, sustained and increased. It is an instrument with which to bludgeon, not a learned discipline.

No historical subject is likely to arouse passion to a greater extent than that of the former British Empire, now defunct except for Pitcairn Island and a few other rocky outcrops around the world. The French Empire, by contrast, is still

far-flung and much larger, though the fiction is maintained (as it was in the case of Algeria, a good deal less convincingly) that Guyane, Guadeloupe and Martinique, Mayotte, and Réunion are actually part of Metropolitan France, while Nouvelle-Calédonie and Tahiti are special administrative regions, but still, in effect, parts of France. As measured by the dispersal of its sovereign territory, France is by far the largest country in the world.

In *Imperial Legacies: The British Empire Around the World*, Professor Jeremy Black attempts a dispassionate estimate of the effect on the world of the British Empire, and I think in large part succeeds. His writing is lucid, his learning immense but lightly worn, and he is obviously averse to the four-legs-good-two-legs-bad school of historiography. I am not sure that he would thank me for saying so, but I think that he combine's Ranke's passion for knowing what really happened with Collingwood's desire to understand it from the point of view of the actors. No history can be definitive, but some can be definitively tendentious—and much, as he points out, is precisely this.

Many people will want to know whether the British Empire was a good thing or a bad, yes or no, but Black avoids a question that demands so simplistic an answer. He tries to put the Empire into a wider historical context, without in any way trying to extenuate the evils that were undoubtedly perpetrated in its name. He is in general opposed to the use of history for the most blatantly political purposes.

It is actually quite difficult to remain cool-headed and retain a sense of proportion when historical wrongs are evoked. The Amritsar Massacre of 1919, in which at least 379 unarmed protesters were shot dead and up to 1500 wounded, is a case in point. Colonel Dyer, convinced that the protesters actually constituted an uprising, but without any real reason for thinking so and in disobedience to general orders, ordered his troops to fire upon them. Disgustingly, his action was

approved of by a large section of the British public, which raised a large sum of money in recognition of his "service" to the Empire, though he was also roundly condemned (by, among others, Winston Churchill) and retired from service. Quite understandably, the Massacre turned many Indians against the British once and for all, and it has been used ever since—again understandably—as a historic justification of Indian nationalism.

It is rather forgotten that the troops that opened fire were themselves Indian, so presumably had some loyalty to the authority that Colonel Dyer represented. More pertinently, perhaps, massacres of Sikhs (Amritsar being their holy city) have taken place under the very regime that uses the Massacre as part of its own legitimation. A Sikh friend of mine had to flee Delhi for his life as three thousand of his coreligionists were murdered in that city, with official complicity, in the wake of the assassination of Mrs Gandhi by Sikh bodyguards. Upwards of 15,000 Sikhs were massacred in other parts of India. Needless to say, these events have not entered official nationalist historiography.

Subsequent events cannot justify or even extenuate previous ones, of course. Life is lived forwards, not backwards. Nobody in Tsarist Russia who deplored Tsarist oppression could *know* that the regime would be replaced by one that was a thousand times worse. Colonel Dyer could not have excused himself by saying, "In sixty-five years' time something far worse is going to happen." If ever a man were guilty of a mass murder, he was—though actually he remained obtusely unaware of the moral monstrosity of what he had done, so bigoted was he.

But this is not really the question that Professor Black addresses. He is against the use of the Amritsar massacre as being uniquely, or unprecedentedly, terrible when, in fact, it was not. The British Empire was an Empire not worse than many, and probably better than some. Moreover, the phenomenon of empire in world or Indian history did not start with it, and

almost certainly will not end with it either. Indeed, a case could be made that countries such as India and Indonesia are themselves empires that were created by the previous empires. China seems to have imperial ambitions, and Tibet's incorporation into China owed nothing to the wishes of the local population.

The history of slavery is naturally one that the author has to tackle. He in no way mitigates its horrors. The fact that American blacks are much better off where they are than they would have been if they had remained in Africa is not a retrospective justification for this atrocious and very long episode in history.

However, the instrumentalization of the history of the slavery and the slave trade in an attempt to extract compensation from former slave-trading countries, or to excuse current misuse of power in African countries, is dishonest. It omits certain of the nuances of the history, such as that the whole trade was possible only because of large-scale African co-operation with it, if for no other reason than that Europeans could not penetrate the interior of Africa until the large-scale production of quinine to cure malaria, which did not happen until the slave trade had long been abolished. Unless the African slave-raiders are to be denied choice and human agency in the matter, they were morally complicit in the slave trade. The reason this is forgotten or seriously downplayed is that there is no political mileage in remembering or dwelling on it.

As to the abolition of the slave trade, those who want to damn the British or European countries without nuance claim that the abolition was not humanitarian in intent, but merely a reaction to changed economic circumstances, such that slave labor was no longer economic. This, it seems to me, as it does to the author, is in obvious contradiction to the evidence. Only if you want to damn a whole country, a whole civilization, could you deny the reality of the humanitarian

impulse of abolitionism, even if it was not the whole story. (Whole stories without ironies are rare in history, though they do exist.)

It is perhaps unfair to demand of what is obviously intended as an essay rather than as a lengthy or comprehensive history that it should mention all that could be said on the questions it addresses: but in my opinion, the author misses one of the worst legacies of the British Empire in Africa, namely the model of government that it left behind. For the most part, African nationalists who inherited power from the departing colonial regime both admired and hated because humiliated by the former colonial masters. They took over as philosopher-kings, all wise dispensers of justice and deciders of questions. Many of them had received an education that alienated them, or at least divided them, from the populations over which they were to rule—or misrule. They inherited the vices of the old regime without any of its virtues, and in some cases—that of Julius Nyerere, for example, who first absorbed the terrible ideas that impoverished his country in Edinburgh University, at the feet of Fabian socialists. It was British Fabianism also that kept India impoverished for so long.

Still, this book is an impressive effort to assess the legacy of empire in a mature and even-handed way. It is neither a whitewash nor a case for the prosecution. It takes aim against the misuse of history for obviously partisan ends and stands against the denial of complexity. Of course, the misuse of history will continue, for the temptation to justify or disguise an inglorious present by reference to the wrongs of the past is one that will persist, more distant events being emphasized at the expense of recent ones that were actually under the direct control of the present power. Dictatorial regimes are particularly prone to this, and totalitarian regimes require it. I could, for example, recite by heart the Cuban historiography that has justified and been a pillar of

tyranny for more than half a century. Professor Black’s book is a fine, subtle, and bracing attempt to counter the polemical misuse of history.

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