

The book's drifting feel is a result of its broken-backed time-scheme. Though it is divided up into chronologically headed sections, starting in 1601 and ending in 1951, each one taking up the reins 50 years on from its predecessor, Rée's stories duck and dive all over the place. A Simon Schama-style opening vignette aside, none of the sections is much concerned with the year it is named for. Rée mentions approvingly Sartre's suggestion that 20th-century philosophers should feel as free to fool around with form as the modernist novelists and painters and poets did. *Witcraft* isn't exactly Woolfian. But anyone ever puzzled by Kant's argument that time is a product of human consciousness might grasp it a little better after reading Rée's book.

Not that he has written a guide to philosophy. Though he explains Cartesianism and Benthamism and Locke's theory of the self well enough, he doesn't take you through anyone's arguments stage by stage. It's not that he has bigger fish to fry: it's that he has a different catch to bring ashore. Some mighty unusual names crop up in a book that hopes "to persuade you that philosophy in English contains far more variety, invention, originality and oddity than it is usually credited with." In a way, Rée, who once said he gave up lecturing in order to "have more time to think", is kicking against the professionalisation of the age. He wants to get philosophy out of the ivory tower and back into the world. So it is that alongside the studies of the standard-issue big shots we get sections not only on the intellectual development of the likes of Coleridge, Carlyle, Hazlitt, and George Eliot, but also on sundry pensive parsons and doubting teachers.

Rée's pen-portraits are skilfully done. He has a good ear for the killer quote. Here is William Godwin, looking forward to the day democracy ensures that "sensual intercourse" takes place only when "the species should be propagated". Here is Adam Smith drinking—on the counsel of no less than Bishop Berkeley—tar-water untouched by "artificial chymistry"[sic]. Here is D.H. Lawrence, calling the sight of Keynes in his pyjamas a "principle of evil". Here is C.K. Ogden, coming on like some demented Beatles-worshipper and playing records backwards the better to understand the nonsense spouted by "eminent metaphysicians".

Beyond the strict parameters of philosophy proper, laughs abound. De Quincey dismisses Kant as a "transcendental pedant", Darwin acknowledges Herbert Spencer's cleverness while confiding that "I seldom feel any wiser after reading him", and as for Ned Ward, landlord of the King's Head in Gray's Inn and Aristotle's soi-disant "Sumpter Horse", he had no time for any of them, offering up "a Fart for VIRGIL and his

Elegancy and a T...d for DESCARTES and his PHILOSOPHY".

But far and away the book's funniest section is the one that brings us most up to date. Not because Wittgenstein was ever less than serious (this is a guy who was on friendly terms with that tiresomely vindictive moralist F.R. Leavis), but because of his constant duelling with his mentor Russell. From the moment they met, when Wittgenstein refused to accept the contention that they were not sharing Russell's rooms with a rhinoceros, to his snorting at Russell's "shilling shockers" (like that aforementioned *History of Western Philosophy*), their relationship was so comically abusive you find yourself thinking that all those Jonathan Miller and Monty Python send-ups were crippled by miscasting. If you want to do Russell and Wittgenstein justice, you need to call in Laurel and Hardy.

Wittgenstein thought philosophy a "synopsis of trivialities". Certainly the thought of too many insubstantial thinkers is summarised in *Witcraft*. I'd love to have had a pint and a chat with Ned Ward, or to have eyeballed Harriet Martineau touring America with only her "ear trumpet of remarkable fidelity" for company. But there is a reason these people don't show up in more conventional accounts. A practical man who trained as an engineer and was an amateur architect, Wittgenstein was fond of telling his students that philosophising was more like "tidying up a room than building a house". Jonathan Rée has found a new room to tidy. It's worth a visit, but be sure not to visit until you know the rest of the place well.

Singled out by the stupid

ROBERT CROWCROFT

**Imperial Legacies:
The British Empire Around the World**

By Jeremy Black

Encounter Books, 199pp, £20

If there is one subject that is guaranteed to provoke an eruption among contemporary progressives, it is the British Empire. In the era of statue wars, identity politics, and the "decolonisation" of university curricula (even policing the ethnicity of authors on reading lists), the Empire remains a unique source of antagonism. There exists a widespread belief that the British variant of imperialism was particularly violent and repressive and thus uniquely in need of condemnation. There have been calls for Nel-

son's Column to be pulled down, because Horatio's views did not reflect modern social mores. An undergraduate student in one of my classes recently insisted that he could discern no differences between the British Empire and the apocalyptic death cult of Islamic State.

Of course, some scholars have offered a more nuanced and thoughtful take on the Empire and its legacy. My own colleague at the University of Edinburgh, Harshan Kumarasingham—a New Zealander of Sri Lankan heritage—is currently doing his best to explore the legacy of British constitutionalism throughout the Commonwealth. Niall Ferguson offered a famously provocative interpretation in his classic *Empire*. And now Jeremy Black, of the University of Exeter, has had a quite ingenious idea for tackling the problem.

Black is probably the most prolific historian on the planet. He has authored more than 100 books (!) and continues to add to his oeuvre with energy. He has written on a mind-boggling array of topics, from 18th-century Britain to global military history to cartography. He has written a pair of books about James Bond. Black is always a pleasure to read: argumentative, stimulating, and engaging. He writes for serious periodicals, including *Standpoint* and *The New Criterion*. He is a well-travelled and in-demand lecturer who has delivered talks across much of the world. I recently listened to a pair of lectures he gave at the wonderful New York Historical Society and was struck by his sheer range. Black is not your ordinary academic historian. His wide-ranging expertise marks him out as a throwback to a less narrow age of university scholarship. And that makes him the ideal figure to write this important book.

Black has raised his head above the parapet, not so much to defend the Empire as to ponder why it arouses such animosity. His views are made clear in the first sentence of the introduction: "Empire reflects power, its existence, and its use." Imperialism has been a fact of historical life, at all times and throughout the world. So why is the British variety singled out? Black argues that when progressives whip themselves up into a frenzy about the British Empire, often they are *really* attacking the modern United States. Britain is "the ostensible target", but the thing they are actually angry about is the power of America. For decades, the US has provided an inexhaustible source of material to power the protests of university students and *bien pensant* intellectuals. These people are typically not suited to thinking strategically, show little historical (or political) awareness, and cannot accept that one indispensable component of world order is hard power. Throwing a rhetorical jab at ▶

the US, or the British Empire, is a straightforward means of validating what Black describes as “theatrical” emotions.

In the cause of knocking down the embodiment of the contemporary West, America, these critics berate the British Empire. British imperialism is treated as a precursor of American imperialism. Given that the Americans succeeded to leadership of a liberal world order crafted by Britain, there is truth to this. But a certain kind of progressive reserves special enmity for the world-systems which have disseminated the liberal capitalist model around the globe. The British world-system and its American successor are the blueprint for the planet: economically, politically, and legally. They advanced the rule of law and prosperity. As Black argues, the reality is that Britain and the US have been more liberal than other imperialist powers. “Judging Britain or, indeed, the United States as an imperial power harshly frequently involves a lack of comparative rigour.” British and American imperialism have, in historical terms, been markedly less repressive than that associated with Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, or pretty much anyone else. Nor is empire a phenomenon of the Anglosphere. As Black shows, states behave in an “imperialist” fashion as a matter of routine. In contemporary Asia, for example, India, Indonesia and China all act in a recognisably imperialist manner.

It is striking that similar hostility to that shown to the US has not been reserved for the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, or radical Islam—to name merely three alternative contenders for world order in the post-1945 world. Xi Jinping has seized huge amounts of personal power, locked up millions of his fellow Chinese, assembled the most technologically sophisticated system of state surveillance of one’s citizens ever devised, boasted of his ambition to demolish the liberal world order, and threatened military actions which, if followed through, would commence a series of conflicts which could kill tens of millions. And yet tweets emanating from Donald Trump are invested with far more gravity.

Hostility to the West certainly serves important unifying and political myths around the world. In modern China, for example, the experience of helplessness in the face of Western powers is a foundational justification for the drive to national assertiveness. It is crucial to the Communist Party and its account of both the past and the future. In Africa, governments need to sustain national myths of liberation. In India, much popular discussion of national history centres on the relatively short period of British imperialism. There is only a limited grasp of the country’s history more broadly, including

far longer periods of Indian imperialism within Asia. This blindspot is telling. As Black points out, the “cutting edge of historiography” is not the work done by obscure academics but the ways in which large, dynamic societies tell themselves stories about their past. These are, inevitably, self-serving. What is remarkable is how completely some in the West have aligned themselves with these narratives.

The tendency to denunciation over “imperialism” is now approaching Maoist levels of feverishness. When the academic Bruce Gilley published an essay which argued that colonialism brought some benefits to the ruled in *Third World Quarterly* in 2017, half of the editorial board resigned because his article did not denounce imperialism as “a crime against humanity”, and the editor received serious threats of violence. Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor at Oxford, and Doug Stokes, of Exeter, have encountered similar problems. This is where presenting the past “in order to satisfy current mores”, as Black puts it, has left modern culture. What is sad is that historians have often been the ones leading the charge, a grave indictment of the profession. Alarming numbers seem to spend their time wishing that people in the past would not have thought, said, and done what they did. That is a bizarre conception of history, one that has led us into deep trouble. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of the British Empire. Jeremy Black’s book offers a compelling and timely discussion of the place that imperialism occupies in the modern imagination.

Scones and jam in the fridge

SIMON KINGSTON

Protestant and Irish: The Minority’s Search for Place in Independent Ireland

Edited by Ian d’Alton and Ida Milne
Cork University Press, 396pp, €39

Small in number and almost pathologically self-effacing, the lives of Southern Irish Protestants, beyond the Big House caricature, are almost invisible to external observers. This book sets out to reveal something of them. The phrase in my family, for the Methodist community from which we come in West Cork, is “thin on the ground, but hard to kill”. Sadly, some of the more empirically-minded among the members of the “Old” IRA put the proposition to the test in 1922. That spate of murders, while brief, have cast a very long shadow. The con-

tention about these killings is one subject fleetingly touched on in this important and welcome collection of “exploratory” essays. It is, however, atypical. In the main, the focus here is on the less traumatic realities of Irish Protestant life in the 26 counties after independence.

One apparent motive for editors Ian d’Alton and Ida Milne in assembling these essays is to show the variety of Irish Protestant character and experience. The decline of the Anglo-Irish gentry into a state of decorative irrelevance, in the decades after the formation of the Irish Free State, is well known. Their fictional half-life has a durability which merits a distinct place on the Periodic Table. Far less adequately understood and discussed in Ireland, or elsewhere, are the lives and attitudes of the “litttle house” Protestant. The experience of those in small rural communities was of an entirely different character to those in and around Dublin and in both urban and agrarian contexts shades of denominational and class difference make for a community that is distinct from the majority, but far from homogenous. Also varied were the political attitudes of Irish Protestants in the revolutionary and immediate post-revolutionary periods. While most favoured the British connection, Irish Protestantism produced leading nationalist and republican thinkers. Their voices have been amplified (perhaps somewhat overamplified) in recent years, but their role here is important. The several anatomies under examination are well-represented here, although the contributors themselves display differing degrees of appreciation of that variety.

Another motive for the editors seems also to contest the “crisis and decline” gloom of the traditional accounts. While Protestant numbers fell markedly between 1911 and 1926 and a pattern of decline persisted thereafter, d’Alton highlights major regional variations. The gradual accommodation of Protestants to the new dispensation was made easier by the incremental nature of constitutional change in the decades after 1922. He writes convincingly, and building on his authoritative earlier work, about the minority parallelism that was possible. Leaders of this “Protestant Free State” were able to take solace from what he calls “cultural royalism” in the years before 1948 (when a republic was declared). Especially in the areas of the country where the minority was substantial, and social and professional networks insulated Protestants from dramatic change, a genteel “whatever you’re having yourself” approach to identity was possible. It is noteworthy that, by and large, this was not inhibited by the state.

This positive story of the Protestant political or constitutional experience is signifi-

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