

*Empireworld. How British Imperialism Has Shaped the Globe*

Sathnam Sanghera

Penguin, £20.00

Doubtless kindness lay behind Penguin's absence of response to the *Critic's* repeated request for a review copy for me of this book. My request also failed, but I have gone out and got one, and now understand. Possibly Penguin felt I might be upset to find no reference to my *Imperial Legacies. The British Empire Around the World* (2019) in a book described as 'a groundbreaking exploration of how British empire has shaped the world we live in today.' But actually no. With its pretensions and authorial conceit, Sanghera's book is actually rather a good laugh. He apparently is the word and the way for Britain which 'cannot hope to have a productive future in the world without acknowledging what it did to the world in the first place,' a process that is to be done on his terms in order to overcome a British allergy to the unattractive aspects of the imperial past.

Stripped to its essentials, this is a book that repeats well-established themes and serves them up in a familiar fashion. Although 461 pages long, only 247 are text and, with a generous typeface that is a pleasure to read, there is only so much space for analysis. Unfortunately, that is what is on offer. It might be thought appropriate to establish what was different or familiar in British imperialism in a Western European context by comparing in detail say Britain's Caribbean empire with those of France, Spain and the Dutch. It might be thought useful to assess Britain as an Asian imperial power alongside Russia or the Ottomans, China or the Persians. It might be appropriate to follow the direction of much of the world history approach over the last half-century and assess empires as shared projects in which there were many stakeholders, British and non-British. To turn to the British empire, it might be useful to discuss the oldest 'colony,' Ireland or to assess policy in Scotland, notably Highland Scotland. It could be appropriate to consider how the causes, context, course and consequences of British imperialism varied greatly, both chronologically and geographically.

Unfortunately, Sanghera has not risen to the challenge. His study is conceptually weak, methodologically flawed, historiographically limited, and lacking basic skills in source-assessment. This is a pity, as his position as a journalist, and his link with Penguin provide an opportunity for using his abilities as a communicator to expand public understanding of the subject. Let us hope that he raises to the challenge in the future.

One point of note is criticism of what is referred to as 'an enervating culture war on the theme of British empire.' While appearing to this reader to be highly subject to the attention, Sanghera rightly draws attention to the flaws of the 'balance sheet' view of British empire, but I am less confident than he is about how best to consider what he terms a 'culture war.' Clearly, personal abuse is highly unwelcome, and there is much on offer that is misleading. Yet the promotion of 'understanding' for which Sanghera calls is scarcely value-free, and he does not adequately address

the degree to which there have always been what are termed culture wars both within Britain and in its colonies and former-colonies. Unsurprisingly so, as there were substantive issues at stake, and questions of goal and identity were very much part of the equation. This, moreover, was more generally true of politics and society. Indeed, it is somewhat strange to see criticism today of ‘culture wars’, whether from Sanghera and some of his journalist colleagues or more generally.

Reading the comments it is hard to avoid a sense that they feel that there is a correct view (theirs, what a surprise), and that others are variously culture wars, populist, ignorant et al. This approach is very much taken to history, notably national history, and, particularly in the case of Britain, empire and slavery. Yet, that stance scarcely captures the complexities of the issue, a problem very much seen in Sanghera’s work despite his claim for nuance. Take the slave trade. How much of an emphasis should be placed on the pre-existing slave trade in Africa and on African agency in the Atlantic trade. On his Caribbean ‘research trip,’ Sanghera found time to note the prices of luxury hotels, but not to visit the best of the museums, that in Guadeloupe. It makes much of both factors, and offers a far more subtle account (reaching to the present) than you will find in Sanghera or indeed for more generally. Yet, one of the four publisher’s readers for the second edition of my *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (2015, 2024) wanted no mention of African agency.

To suggest there is no ‘culture wars’ on empire is mystifying, and implies that the present is somehow different to the past when such differences and exchanges were commonplace, indeed a key element of identity and politics.

That captures another problem with Sanghera’s work, his tendency to exaggerate the impact of empire and, in doing so, fail to give sufficient prominence to earlier factors as well as to the limited chronological span of empire. The latter does not inherently mean that empire was inconsequential, but rather that it has to be placed in context. This of course is not only true for Britain. There is for example much to be gained by putting the Japanese imperial episodes in Taiwan and Korea into context. Similarly, the British presence in much of empire, for example Burma or Sudan, was shortlived, and very different in impact to that in Ireland or Barbados.

To emphasise, as Sanghera does, the British imperial presence can be to downplay local agency, and in a curiously implicit, though doubtless unintended, pejorative way. That is the case for example with West Africa, in which Western imperialism was but one of a wide range of transformative factors, local and international. The impact of Islam in and from the *sahel* has been of greater long-term consequence. Sanghera might disagree, but he tends to shy away from analysis and debate, preferring a selection of citation based on *a priori* assumptions that reflect a limited understanding of historical processes.

For Nigeria, he refers to ‘the disastrous merging of very different ethnic groups into one political structure.’ Maybe so, and worth consideration, but it is not of course the case that such a

process awaited the Europeans in West Africa. There were significant empires within the sub-continent, Mali and Songhai being but two. Moreover, the conflicts and enslavement seen in the absence of European control scarcely suggests that British imperialism was the source of conflict. There is, indeed, a sense of profound laziness in much of the analysis offered by Sanghera. He really should have devoted more attention to the pre-Western history of the areas he discusses, for, as in Sudan, this history has persisted. In part, empire worked by adapting foreign rule into a practice of shared control, and that is as or more significant than resistance or violence. Such a proposition should of course be contextualised in different places and periods, but it is one that deserves attention, not least in helping explain the modern world.

And so also when discussing the imperialisms, however defined, of other empires at the present moment, whether China or India, Russia or the United States. Yet, there is scant intellectual capital invested in this approach. Instead, it is discussion by diatribe that is to the fore.

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