

The 'British Empire' was the name given by imperialists in the late 19th century to Britain's territorial possessions. It was meant to create an image of unity and strength. But such a view is illusory, argues **Bernard Porter**.

Cutting the British Empire Down to Size



With the British Empire finally dead and buried – give or take a Falkland or two – now may be a good time to pause and try to take stock of what it was while it still had breath in it. This won't be easy. For a start, it may be too early. Historical judgements take a while to bed down. Even then they are subject to revision by successive generations, influenced by new discoveries and their own historical environments. Subjects like imperialism are complex and can be approached from many different angles. In the case of the British Empire the problem is exacerbated by the fact that its death is still too recent to be looked on dispassionately and its legacy too present to be ignored. Hence the controversy that rages today between the broadly pro-imperial Niall Ferguson (*Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, 2003) and the uncompromisingly anti-imperialist Richard Gott (*Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt*, 2011). That

'From the Cape to Cairo' Puck, 1902. Britannia leads civilising soldiers and colonists against Africans as Civilisation conquers Barbarism.



debate would not be so heated if the ghost of the old empire was not felt to be haunting us still.

The ghost of yet another empire lurks behind it. British imperialists often made comparisons between their empire and the much longer-dead Roman one. It was the image of this great empire, present in popular culture and in contemporary school syllabuses, much more than the British Empire ever was, that largely determined perceptions of imperialism. It was where the word 'imperial' came from: a Latin term (*imperium*) associated with notions of power, authority and control. It is a big, strong, singular word, implying a big, strong, singular thing. That is why British imperialists liked it. One of the issues that needs to be determined before making any assessment of the effects and legacies of the British Empire, therefore, is how big, strong and singular it really was.

We shouldn't be fooled by appearances. All those red-bedaubed world maps that became fashionable in Britain around 1900, for example, give an impression of uniform British power, which is certainly false. A truer picture would have been conveyed by colouring most parts a much lighter pink and some with only the faintest blush (to be fair, cartographers often did this with Egypt and the Indian princely states). If we are measuring British imperialism in terms of informal influence, certain countries outside the empire can be pinked in, too. You might also put a few drops of red into the oceans, to reflect Britain's naval dominance.

In fact those red patches on the map covered an extraordinary variety of relationships between the colonies and the 'mother' country, which would require a whole new palette to colour-code them accurately. These ranged from absolute despotisms and racist tyrannies; through colonies ruled paternalistically, in intention at any rate, and territories simply 'protected' by the British; to colonies whose (white) people were far more 'free' than stay-at-home Britons and those whose (non-white) subjects were so little touched by the system that they could barely have been aware that they were colonies at all. Beyond these there were disguised colonies like Egypt; territories mandated after the First World War, in one of which, Palestine, Britain's role was mainly a thankless peace-keeping one; her 'informal' colonies – nominally independent, but dominated, for example, by British commercial companies; and Ireland, which could be said to straddle both sides of the imperial-colonial divide. That's without taking any account of what is more problematically termed British 'cultural imperialism': problematic because, if 'imperialism' means anything at all, it must surely involve some sort of duress or domination, which is difficult to show in the case of, say, Brazilians choosing to play football.

To bundle all these together under the rubric of 'empire' seems perverse. Equating the experience of a colonial Nigerian with that of a New South Waleian, for example, which is what you get when you categorise them both as imperial victims, makes no sense at all. Insofar as they were victims (and there are, of course, other ways of looking at them) the latter certainly were no more so than most Britons. My old granddad in Essex was probably

more exploited there than he would have been if his granddad had made the journey to Australia that apparently was at one time planned for him. (Family legend has it that he narrowly escaped transportation for keeping a muck-heap outside his house in Writtle.) In most cases there were other forces at work in addition to the discretely imperial one. In my granddad's it was industrial capitalism. The same applied in many colonial cases, too.

Another image of imperial strength to be wary of is the great public show the empire made around 1900: the fantastic gubernatorial uniforms, the ceremonial puffery of the 1897 Diamond Jubilee and the 'mafficking' of the early Boer War. But in 1900 the empire was coming to seem under threat. Many of these displays of loyalty to it were nervous reactions to this. It was only around then, too, that British imperialists began thinking of their colonial possessions as a unity; of the empire as an empire, in order to strengthen it against these threats. Before this it had been a much more messy affair.

The association of capitalism with imperialism is well-known. It used to be denied by imperialists in more social-democratic times, when 'capitalism' was a term of implied abuse. It is acknowledged by all (and positively celebrated by Niall Ferguson) now that capitalism has become respectable again. But the precise relationship between the two is not always understood. The expansion of British trade and finance into the wider world generally came before the more formal kind of imperialism; in other words the flag followed trade rather than vice-versa. That is assuming it followed at all. You could have foreign trade without imperialism, or at least, that is what contemporaries believed, before modern historians decided that this should be called imperialism, too.

Whether this is a valid extension of the meaning of the word is a matter of opinion: imperialism doesn't have one, set definition and is used in a variety of ways. My own preference is for a usage that preserves the notion of compulsion or pressure.

For the Victorians there was a clear distinction between imperialism and mere commercial expansion, which explains why, until the last quarter of the 19th century, they often denied they were engaged in the former. Denial was not easy in the light of the formal colonies Britain already possessed, which were often regarded as embarrassing obligations incurred in less enlightened times to be shed as soon as respectably possible. (Canada would be the first.) Even in these places the flag was not supposed to give Britain any particular commercial advantages, with their markets usually open to all other nations.

This was not colonialism in the 18th-century, mercantilist sense. Free trade, in fact, was widely supposed to be both the antithesis and the antidote to imperialism, bringing an end to, as the great anti-Corn Laws agitator Richard Cobden put it in 1846, 'the desire and the motive for large and mighty empires; [and] for gigantic armies and great navies – for those materials which are used for the destruction of life and the desolation of the rewards of labour'; all this 'as man becomes one family, and freely exchanges the fruits of his labour with his brother man'. Today it is possible to read all kinds of imperialist inferences between these lines: who are we to tell the world what is best for it? But it is easy to see how contemporaries could be persuaded that they were embarking on an entirely different and more ethical course. This was what differentiated mid-19th-century Britain from all previous imperial times and nations.

It was also a highly convenient position from a practical point of view. This kind of (theoretically)



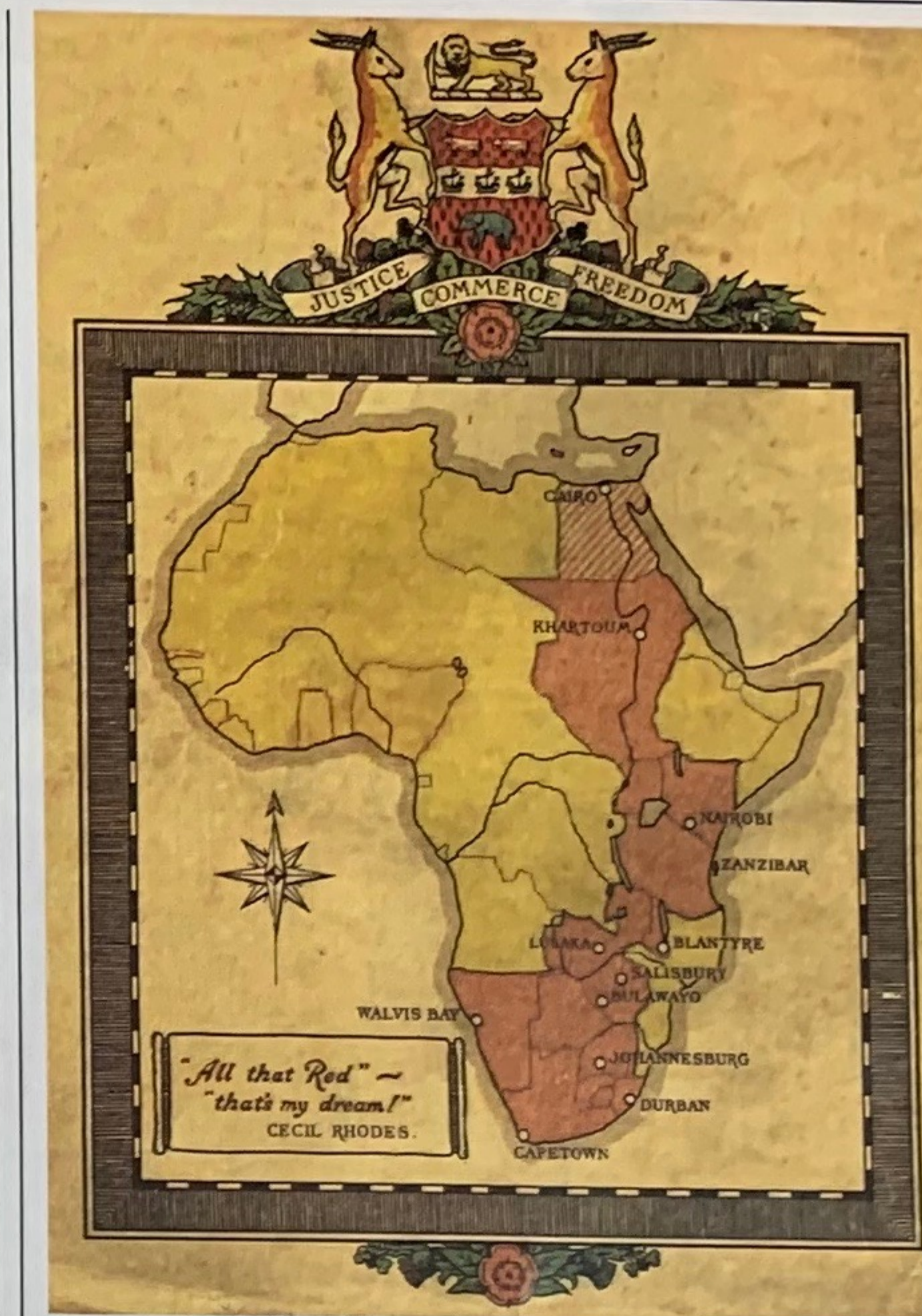
From the Archive

HT A Moral Audit of the British Empire
Piers Brendon asks how we can arrive at a fair judgement of the benefits of the Empire for those who enjoyed – or endured – its rule.
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Lewanika, Chief of the Barotse, who in 1890 gave mineral and commercial rights in his territory to the British South Africa Company.



The back cover of the catalogue for the Empire Exhibition at Johannesburg in 1936/7 shows the extent of Cecil Rhodes' ambitions in Africa.



peaceful expansion was well suited to a nation whose military capacities (as opposed to naval) were not of the highest order, by comparison with three or four continental European armies. Luckily European armies before the 1880s were less interested in challenging Britain in these commercial theatres, which left it with only technologically backward 'native' opponents when it came to defending its economic interests outside Europe.

Cost was the other convenience. Britain's commercial expansion, and the formal imperialism that rode on the back of it, were on the whole cheap. Free trade was more than merely a commercial policy. It was tied in to a whole economic ideology, called 'political economy' then – 'free marketism' or 'neo-liberalism' today – one tenet of which was that enterprise worked best if it was not taxed. Anything that required tax revenues was therefore discouraged. That is partly why the British army was relatively skimpy and why colonies could not be allowed to become a direct burden on the British Treasury. They had to be 'self-sufficient': their revenues, even for their defence, raised locally.

This had profound implications for the way the empire was subsequently ruled. The main one was that it could only be done on the cheap. Sometimes this was achieved by sending out men (always men) from the public schools (nearly always the public schools) in pith helmets and khaki shorts, or more exotic clothing if they went as 'governors'. These imperial proconsuls were more old-fashioned paternalistic than new capitalist, thanks to the values they had imbibed at their public schools. ('He's in trade' was a common put-down among this class.) True free market capitalists didn't reckon much to governing in any circumstances; it was against the grain to work at an occupation which was neither productive nor

profitable. Colonial rulers did not generally share the free market ideology of the people whose activities had given rise to the necessity of their presence in the first place. Consequently, and to avoid unsettling their charges and the risk of provoking rebellion, many of them actually obstructed the capitalist exploitation of the colonies they were in charge of. Certainly it was not they – the highest-profile and most conventionally imperialist of the imperialists – who were responsible for spreading capitalism to Africa, Asia and elsewhere; or 'democracy', which they scarcely understood; or any of the other features of modernisation that present-day apologists for imperialism attribute to British rule in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The main point about this cadre of men, however, is how few they were. This was because more of them could not be afforded without inflicting unacceptable taxation either on the British or their colonial subjects. Taxes for colonial purposes could provoke rebellions in both places. There was a 'Hut Tax war' in Sierra Leone in 1898, for example, and a Commons revolt against a tax to police and govern Mesopotamia (Iraq) in 1921. In total there were just 2,000 British imperial servants 'in the field' over the whole of British India in the 1900s, plus about another 2,000 in the rest of the empire: just 4,000 to control hundreds of millions of native subjects. Of course they had soldiers to back them, many in India (albeit a minority British) but far fewer elsewhere, as well as native collaborators to help them with the more mundane tasks.

Collaborators, however, need to be collaborated with. This was crucial to Britain's governance of its 'Crown' colonies, which was generally indirect, both in terms of using local traditional rulers and of generally preserving the natives' own customs and cultures. Again this was found to be less unsettling than trying to change them (the Indian 'Mutiny' in 1857 was a lesson in the dangers



India bows to Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, caricatured by Francis Carruthers Gould in the *Struwwelpeter Alphabet*, 1900.

of that) and some British colonial officials did grow genuinely to value Indian and African cultures. The common idea, therefore, that British imperialists invariably set out to westernise their subjects is not altogether sound. Even if they had wanted to they couldn't have.

Economy with regard to colonial government was achieved elsewhere by delegating its duties to others. Most of the British Empire in the 19th- and 20th-centuries was what we would now call 'privatised', for two of the reasons usually adduced for privatisation today: to save money and to shed responsibility. The other reason, that 'private' always works better, was not so much in evidence. The three main sorts of beneficiary were local rulers (Indian princes, for example); European settlers (in Australasia, British North America, the ex-slave islands of the West Indies for a brief period and southern and eastern Africa); and 'chartered' capitalist companies (in India, going back centuries, Africa and the Pacific). Liberal governments from the 1880s were particularly keen on this last device, which chimed with their free market principles and also – they believed – with their anti-imperialism. In 1906 Britain even granted representative government, with a racist constitution of which no one approved, to the Transvaal Boers, a people it had just beaten in a bruising war. The reason given was that the government was powerless to do anything else. This could be regarded as a sort of anti-imperialism. These were colonies where metropolitan control – 'imperialism' by one definition – was minimal, allowing the forces of capitalism and settlerism to operate freely and 'naturally'. These were the major forces here, with the empire's main role being a negative one, not to hold them back.

All this undermined Britain's effective control over its empire and its ability either to do good there or to prevent harm. Southern Rhodesia, outsourced in the 1880s to both a private company – Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company (BSAC) – and the white settlers who came in its train, did all the 'ruling' over the black African majority, with the Colonial Office hardly getting a look in, until the country's genuine independence, as Zimbabwe, in 1980. This is not to absolve Britain from moral or legal accountability for what went on in Rhodesia during that period, any more than a government that privatises railways or schools or health provision can avoid either the credit or the blame for the way they operate subsequently.

The licence that settlers and capitalists were given in so many of the British colonies had mixed and controversial effects. They, rather than the conservative and paternalistic proconsuls, were the main agents of modernisation, economic, cultural and social. If you consider this was a good thing, or perhaps a regrettable necessity (which was the way a lot of 'progressive' Victorians regarded it) you will look upon these enterprising colonists indulgently. Against this are two main arguments. The first questions the value of capitalism in this form for the good of these countries and even of the world: encouraging unbalanced colonial monocultures, for example; exhausting soils with intensive and large-scale farming methods; and uprooting native societies. (It was this last consequence that set the paternalists against it.) The second points to the sheer human suffering, way beyond 'uprooting', which came in the train of these developments.

The history of the British and of other European empires is punctuated by 'atrocities': slavery, mass killings, avoidable famines. Many of these were inflicted by settlers: for example against the aborigines in Australia, the natives of southern Africa, Native Americans, in the West Indies, in Kenya and in French Algeria; or by capitalist entrepreneurs: Atlantic slave traders; the BSAC in southern Africa; Malayan planters; King Leopold's rubber-tapping 'cessionaires' in the Congo Free State. If you count the British East India company as capitalist, which is stretching things a bit for the mid-19th century, by which time it had lost its trading function but was still largely independent of government, you can also debit the several Indian wars that culminated in the 1857 'Mutiny' to this. Britain took over the Company directly in 1858 as a result. One might even include the great famines in Ireland (1840s) and Bengal (1940s) as exacerbated by contemporary economic-liberal theory, which in its most severe form taught that these matters were best left to the markets. The key point, however, is that they were not directly caused by the kind of imperialism represented by pith-helmeted, khaki-shortened young prefects.

This suggests a paradox: that the less genuine and formal colonial government was, the worse things were likely to be. Indeed it was for this reason that the most thoughtful anti-imperialists of the early 20th century were against Britain's simple withdrawal from its colonies. Thinkers such as the economist J.A. Hobson (1858-1940) argued that this wouldn't genuinely liberate them, but would leave them more vulnerable to

capitalist imperialism. Hobson and others called instead for international 'trusteeship' over European empires until their subjects could properly be prepared for self-rule. This was one of the supposed purposes of the post-First World War mandates system.

Britain's imperial weakness was finally exposed between the First World War and the 20 years after 1945. The empire became impossible to defend against rising nationalist movements, helped from outside, without resorting to a degree of firmness or brutality that people in Britain, whose attachment to the empire was predicated on the belief that it was essentially liberal, were reluctant to tolerate. Repression was tried at first: in Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus and elsewhere. (These were the occasions of many of Britain's worst colonial 'atrocities'.) But its failure and the remarkably rapid dismantling of the empire that followed shows just how weak the empire had been for years and how little its disappearance affected the majority of Britons. The collapse was presented by government as 'granting' self-rule to the natives, in India a 'transfer of power': almost the culmination of the old, Cobdenite liberal project; but that fooled no one.

These realities challenge the notion of a British imperium in the Roman sense. Britain was only able to rule most of its empire on the sufferance of local collaborators: native chiefs and princes, empowered settlers and companies, even many of its prefects, all of whom had agendas of their own. This was a cause of weakness in other ways, too. Though the soldiers of the Dominions and India contributed military strength in the two world wars, this must be weighed against the advantage taken by colonial nationalists as a result of those conflicts to push their own anti-imperialist claims. Furthermore the First World War (and consequently, indirectly, the second) was partly provoked by the existence of the British Empire. Diplomatically this form of rule was frequently a liability: drawing Britain unproductively into Afghanistan and the Nile Valley, for example, in order to defend India and the routes to it;

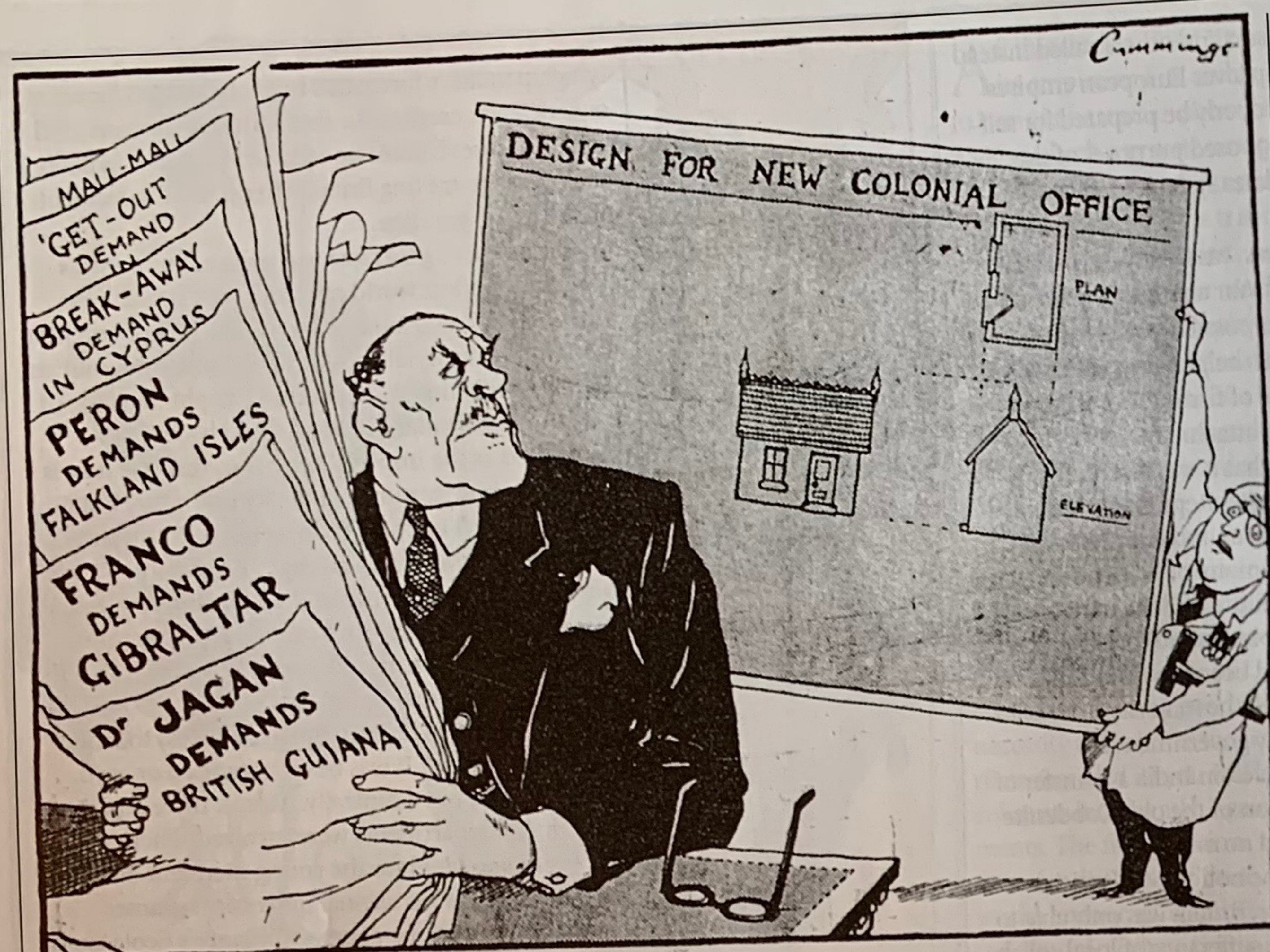
tying up military forces that might be needed for its own defence; creating for rival European nations (and later the Soviet Union) unnecessary points of irritation; and overall restricting Britain's freedom of movement on the European stage.

The empire's great size was misleading if it was thought to reflect world power. If only it could be organised and consolidated to realise its full potential thought the imperialists – tariff, defence and political unions were mooted – something might be made of it, so long as ordinary Britons could become as committed as the imperial zealots were. (The jury is still out on how committed the former were; but it certainly wasn't enough.) Most efforts in this direction, however, came to nothing. The empire continued to disappoint, on these grounds at least. Later, its successor, the multiracial, self-governing 'Commonwealth', acquired a certain moral authority, but that was different.

The empire was just too much of a mess to make this kind of impact. It was never organised or even loosely administered centrally. At least three separate government departments were involved. There was little training offered for the young men sent out to run it, beyond the occasional university summer school; nothing on the pattern of France's *Ecole Coloniale*. Governing was learned on the job, underpinned by a public school education: lessons from Classical history that were supposed to be good for all time; hints about 'character', 'stiff upper lip' and the like; a tradition of *noblesse oblige*; and maybe some prejudices against the working classes that could be carried over to 'natives'. Beyond that, attitudes and policies were largely formed by experience in the field and how a man regarded his function there. It could be a steep learning curve.

Mau Mau suspects led away for questioning by the police in Nairobi, Kenya, 1952.





Michael Cummings' 1953 cartoon on the need to revise plans for the new British Colonial Office to accommodate a rapidly shrinking empire.

This applied especially to racial attitudes. It is commonly assumed that imperialism and 'racism' went together, with the racism deriving from whites' home-taught feelings of racial superiority; but this is an oversimplification. For a start the most racist Europeans were often anti-imperialist: like the French writer Arthur de Gobineau, who was afraid of the racial mixing that might ensue; and Charles Dickens, who saw no point in trying to do good for inferior races that were doomed in any case (and at the expense of the British working classes, who deserved it more).

At the other end of the spectrum, some people became working imperialists because they believed in human equality. This was true of most Christian missionaries, whose whole purpose rested on the assumption that the peoples they were there to convert were at least convertible. They were probably the major agents of cultural westernisation in the colonial field, hence the suspicion and even hostility shown to them by many conservative colonial officers. The missionaries' prejudices tended to be cultural rather than racial. For government officers it was different: they needed to respect native religions and hierarchies in order to work through them. Some believed these were racially determined: that animism, for example, was in the West African's genes; but it was possible, theoretically, to hold that they were 'separate but equal', to use a term later beloved of apartheid politicians, which indicates how treacherous the idea could be.

Public school paternalism also carried the implication that the wards were 'children'; but children grow up. (The question was, when?) Small traders, who had to negotiate with their customers, generally got along with the indigenous peoples pretty well. So did most explorers. The most conventionally racist of the colonialists were the European settlers, whose attitudes

again conformed to their function: they needed to believe in the natives' racial inferiority in order to justify taking their lands and forcing them to labour. That is quite apart from the military, whose prime function was to kill them. We know from recent wars what can happen to soldiers' perceptions of their enemies. Hence the settlers' and military's disproportionate involvement in colonial atrocities. Colonists' racial attitudes were mainly acquired on the spot, not brought with them from home; where, incidentally, the teaching of racism in schools was far less common than in European countries that didn't have colonies. This might suggest that the effect of having an empire, or at least one that needed to be collaborated with, was to undermine racial prejudice, rather than the opposite. (But this needs more comparative research.)



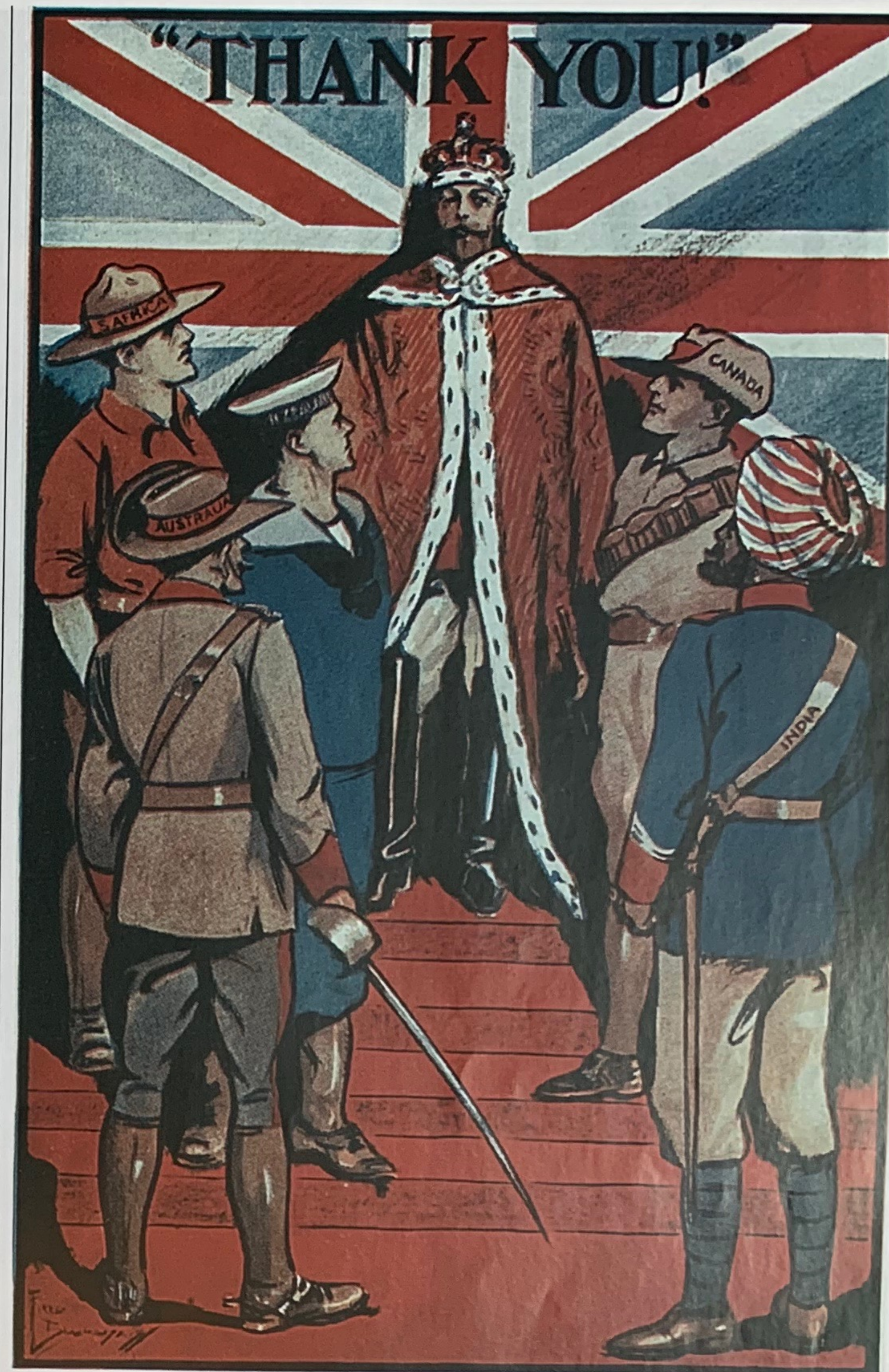
Punch cartoon of 1899 on the move to federate the Australian colonies after an intercolonial cricket team represented Australia in the first test match against England in 1877, inaugurating the Ashes.

Of course Britain's general influence in the world, during the 19th century especially, was immense. You can still see it today. The omnipresence of the English language points to this. Her peoples' DNA is widely spread. Sites all over the world bear British names. Many developing countries have frontiers, often awkward ones, negotiated between Britain and other powers. The Industrial Revolution started in Britain and expanded from there. Many of the world's railways bear witness to this. Cricket and association football may be considered, if not its greatest contributions to world civilisation, at least the ones that are least alloyed. The constitutions and legal systems of several countries bear the mark of Britain's. There are some gaps. Its cuisine doesn't appear to have caught on so widely. Other countries have been far more influential artistically, with the exception of literature.

The point is, however, that very little of this required an empire, or anything that can usefully be called imperialism (implying compulsion or pressure), to achieve it. Frontiers – certainly. Migrant settlers and certain markets needed protection by the Royal Navy and just a few land troops. Cricket may have required a longer period of imperial tutelage to establish it than football because it is a more complicated game (which is why the two sports have such different geographical spreads). Most of the rest, however, could have done – and done better – without the empire, or 'imperialism' in the limited sense that I prefer. At most the formal empire was just a part of this and not nearly as potent a part as these other softer kinds of influence, including the great natural force of unfettered capitalism, which of course continues.

As well as being historically misleading, attaching to the British Empire all this (Roman) baggage can actually be dangerous. We are familiar with African leaders blaming European imperialism for most bad things and even suspecting western countries of imperial ambitions against their countries still. In Uganda British colonists are charged with introducing homosexuality there; West African Anglican bishops resist Canterbury's (relative) tolerance in this area as 'liberal imperialism'; while over in Jamaica, confusingly, liberals blame the empire for local homophobia. Muammar Gaddafi used to rally his followers against the 'crusader-imperialism' of the West: the crusader prefix, of course, adding a particular frisson for Muslims. Apart from anything else, this kind of charge attributes far too much potency to imperialism in the sense they mean.

More serious, however, is when pro-imperialists attribute all the good in the world to western imperialism, in its role of disseminating what they like to call western values. The title and subtitle of Niall Ferguson's latest book (and TV series) *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011) perfectly encapsulate this. The flaw is that most values described as western are not exclusively that. Nearly all of them are also found rooted in certain Chinese and Indian societies, as Jack Goody has shown in his book *The Theft of History* (2007), about the way the West has falsely appropriated these ideas. Unfortunately many



'Resterners', as Ferguson dismissively calls them, seem to have fallen for the imperial view of this. Reacting against their former imperial masters, they often reject what they take to be their ideas, also. So, as a Sri Lankan commentator put it in 1999 in response to a typically 'liberal imperialist' speech by Tony Blair, what the West presents as universal human rights are not that really, but only 'relative to the present West, which has been successful in establishing its hegemony over the whole world'.

No one likes to be told even the right thing to do by a bully; even if the bully – in this case the British Empire – isn't as tough as he used to dress himself up to be.

Bernard Porter is the author of *The Lion's Share. A History of British Imperialism 1850 to the Present* (5th edn., Pearson, 2012). His review of John Darwin's *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (Allen Lane, September 2012) begins on page 59.

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