

Grob-Fitzgibbon, Benjamin: *Imperial Endgame. Britain's Dirty Wars and the End of Empire*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011. ISBN: 978-0-230-24873-1; 478 S.

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In many respects, this is a very welcome study of an important, and topical, dimension to the last phase of British colonial rule. Until relatively recently, historians of British decolonization were tempted to take a positive view of their subject, concurring that, in comparison with other European colonial powers, Britain enjoyed an imperial retreat which was generally peaceful, ordered and above all planned. Although it was acknowledged that British withdrawal was sometimes accompanied by violence, seen most catastrophically in the communal carnage which engulfed India in 1947, the idea that late British colonial rule might have been characterised by the deliberate use of violence to suppress resistance and engineer compliance on the part of colonial populations was something with which many British writers seemed strangely reluctant to engage. Even allowing for the theoretically 'lean' nature of much earlier research, this silence in itself requires some explanation.

Of course, it is possible that traditional British interpretations, rather than reflecting historiographical myopia, are central to a carefully constructed narrative (or 'national myth'), devised for specific political reasons. In Britain's case, the curious downgrading of decolonization's significance may reflect the need to avoid the societal fissures triggered by decolonization in other colonial powers, to portray the end of empire as a process of controlled adjustment, either marking the fulfilment of a noble imperial 'mission', or, more plausibly, the acknowledgement of changed geopolitical and economic circumstances. Either way, Britain's view of its recent imperial past has stressed continuities, not ruptures, co-operation, not conflict, and for several decades this hegemonic interpretation effectively stifled serious public discussion of a topic of demonstrable importance. In the face of more detailed research exploring the realities of wi-

thdrawal from India, Palestine and elsewhere, the earlier, strikingly complacent view of British decolonization has gradually been eroded by a generation of researchers less chronologically close to the processes they have been examining, and so (usually) freer than their predecessors to discuss uncomfortable truths about Britain's past. Accordingly, there has emerged an increasingly nuanced view of decolonization, willing to acknowledge that the end of empire, in Britain's case, was accompanied by startling levels of violence, if not in every instance, then frequently enough to dispel the cosy myth of a planned, orderly disengagement. In a sense, Dr Grob-Fitzgibbon's book is part of that on-going process of reappraisal. Researched with great care, employing a wide range of archival and secondary sources, and written with considerable style, it provides a comprehensive survey of key case studies where Britain's retreat from empire was associated with conflict.

What will surprise many readers is the author's tendency to assert that he is framing his findings within a novel interpretative model. The last three decades of historical research have established what comes close to being a consensus among historians, at least in Britain, on the primary thrust of British decolonization. Although policy had to be adjusted from one territory to another, its basic logic remained consistent: to allow British withdrawal from the colonial empire to take place on British terms, leaving in place wherever possible friendly, co-operative, above all pro-western regimes, and neutralising possible challenges to those regimes. How far this policy succeeded in the long-term is another matter entirely, although the expansion of the British Commonwealth has often been taken as a crude measure both of the relatively painless nature of Britain's disengagement from colonial rule and of London's skill in constructing a network of post-colonial relationships, however nebulous these might have proven to be. But Dr Grob-Fitzgibbon risks misleading his audience by implying that in depicting British policy as more rational and deliberate than once thought, reflecting calculated metropolitan self-interest, he is revealing something quite new, which he is not. It is over thirty years since Jack Gallagher po-

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sited the idea of an imperial revival during and after the Second World War, and this concept has had enormous influence on subsequent research. It would have been more accurate for the author to have emphasised the true novelty of his book, in providing so detailed, knowledgeable and perceptive an analysis of his specific theme – the violence which frequently accompanied Britain's disengagement from empire. It was in relation to Britain's overriding desire to maintain control over the decolonization process that a willingness to employ coercion to achieve its aims became evident. Moreover, it is in giving a careful account of this process that this book's true value lies, and this is the field in which the author can most convincingly demonstrate his very considerable expertise.

Some readers may question the author's focus on the exclusively British viewpoint on this subject. But this is not, after all, primarily a study of resistance movements and of the various factors which mobilised them. Rather, what we are given is a careful study of how successive policy-makers dealt with the challenges to British colonial rule and weighed the options available to them. From their initial perspective, which gave priority to securing increased resources and a greater freedom in their use, we are shown the development of a more considered strategy, in which military action was generally blended with political concessions, calculated to win over, or maintain, the co-operation of 'moderate' colonial politicians. As the author demonstrates, Britain's post-war colonial empire, in theory a 'liberal' regime, came increasingly to rely on illiberal, coercive methods in the pursuit of larger policy objectives. While employing coercion, British colonial rule was still simultaneously trying to manufacture 'consent' to its authority, especially through its policy of colonial 'development'. From a British perspective, it might be argued that this strategy succeeded, at least in the short term: in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus, post-colonial regimes acceptable to Britain assumed power, although only after protracted and bloody campaigns of 'counter-insurgency'. The most notable exception to this pattern was Aden, which was drawn swiftly into the Soviet orbit after a hurried independence.

Among the author's most interesting conclusions is the notion that, in terms of strategy, there existed an over-arching logic to British policy, even though local British officials might enjoy considerable influence on how this policy was both modelled and implemented. This sense of there having been a 'grand strategy' encompassing British behaviour is illustrated by a number of very useful comparisons drawn by the author between his case studies. Inevitably, the question arises: did the British learn from their experience? Certainly, their attempts to maintain order in Palestine up to 1948 proved ultimately to be a nightmarish experience, as well as being increasingly costly and damaging to Britain's international reputation. Yet they were also instructive for British policy-makers who, with the possible exception of India during the wartime 'Quit India' campaign, had not recently faced this kind of local resistance, on such a scale. It would have been fascinating to hear more on the author's views about the extent to which British policy-makers really did learn from their various experiences, about how the Palestine counter-insurgency, for instance, might have impacted on the handling of the Malayan 'Emergency', entirely different as the two cases were. Or is it the case that Britain, like other counter-insurgent powers, lurched clumsily from one crisis to another, gaining little wisdom along the way? *Imperial Endgame* does not always provide obvious solutions, and this is partly because of its structure. Since each case study is dealt with separately, it is often left to the reader to discern larger patterns in the development of British thinking. Arguably, this arrangement was the only sensible option available to the author, if he were to produce a clear narrative, as he certainly does. But a few more interventions by him to comment on the accumulating consequences of each case study, and of their interactions, might have been helpful. Similarly, there is surprisingly little comment in the book on the moral implications of British behaviour during decolonization: the author clearly believes that such judgements are best made by others. But more positively, in recounting the methods employed by Britain to maintain 'order', the author presents a much-needed counterweight to the

elegantly phrased, and intentionally reassuring opinions so often encountered in the recorded views of contemporary policy-makers. That he does this by considering so diverse a range of case studies only serves to make his account more compelling. In short, this book offers a timely and valuable corrective to any lingering historiographical complacency on British disengagement from empire. As such, it promises to enrich discussion of a central theme in contemporary British (and world) history, and deserves to have a wide readership.

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