

Hyam, Ronald: *Britain's Declining Empire. The Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007. ISBN: 978-0-521-86649-1; 464 S.

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In *Britain's Declining Empire*, Ronald Hyam has produced a welcome addition to the historiography of decolonisation. Hyam, Emeritus Reader in British Imperial History at the University of Cambridge, is well placed to undertake a task of this nature, having previously edited 'The Labour Government and the End of Empire, 1945-1951' and 'The Conservative Government and the End of Empire, 1957-1964' (with W. R. Louis). Hyam brings his wide knowledge of official British governmental documents to bear in his latest work. As the preface notes, scholars typically invoke four main factors when looking to explain the end of empire. The first places importance on the actions of colonial nationalists; the second highlights imperial overstretch and economic constraints on the part of the metropolitan power; a collapse of morale or 'failure of will' is the third explanation; the fourth cites international criticism, particularly in the United Nations. Most historians favour an interlocking explanation of metropolitan, colonial and international influences. In 'Britain's Declining Empire', Hyam uses a wide and varied selection of examples to contend that the international facet of decolonisation was, in fact, the primary consideration in British colonial policy of the mid-twentieth century.

Throughout the book, Hyam argues that the context of the Cold War was crucial in dictating British policy. In this milieu Britain's paramount interest was to shape emergent nationalism in an attempt to resist the appeal of communism in its colonial territories. As the post-war period progressed it became apparent that formal empire was irreconcilable with this aim. Therefore in order to retain its influence and prestige, Britain moved through a series of stages in its withdrawal from empire, beginning with India and in this account ending with Swaziland. This process was not without its problems, as the examples of Southern Rhodesia and South Africa demonstrate.

The first chapter examines the period 1918-1945 and sets the scene for post-war developments. Hyam considers the effects of racism, Zionism, na-

tionalism, the British Commonwealth, geopolitics and the effects of the Second World War. He concludes that racism, although an underlying reality was not a critical problem for the imperial system; however this was not the case with regard to the attitudes of settlers. The promotion of Zionism in this period was an attempt to acquire informal control without annexation. Britain attempted to manage both of these outbreaks through the precedent of Ireland. The Commonwealth gained increasing influence after the Balfour Definition (1926) and the Statute of Westminster (1931), and it was seen as a potential model for the League of Nations. Hyam argues that British Empire's aim was primarily geopolitical security or commercial profit. The former is his preferred explanation for the twentieth century as he states 'the geopolitical problems of an over-extended Empire can explain all the overseas policies of the 1920s and 1930s, from appeasement to the Singapore naval base' (p. 74).

In the second chapter Hyam contends that Attlee's colonial policy was dictated by Britain's weak economic position; the need to win the cold war; the necessity of maintaining popular goodwill in its territories and keeping 'one jump ahead of the nationalists, making timely and graceful concessions from a position of relative control' (p. 166). Following Indian independence, the colonial development of Africa came to the fore as it was believed that, if properly developed; Africa would ease Britain's financial dependence on the American dollar and reinvigorate the domestic economy. Hyam addresses this in detail and concedes that economic weakness proved an insurmountable obstacle to Britain regaining her 'informal empire' in the post-war world. However, he believes that in the case of the formal empire the cold war provided 'other and probably even more powerful pressures' in dictating British colonial policy (p. 136).

The two Conservative governments of Churchill and Eden are then considered. Here again, Hyam illustrates how British policy was formulated under four main constraints: relative decline, financial weakness, colonial nationalism and international criticism. The importance of personalities is also highlighted. Churchill's colonial decisions were 'geared towards compromise, reconciliation and even handed justice' (p. 172), in contrast to Eden's colonial policy which by the time of the Suez crisis had 'assumed an essentially schizophrenic character' (p. 229). Hyam also in-

roduces the reader to key personalities in Whitehall and demonstrates that there was a certain consistency throughout both Conservative and Labour governments in colonial policy. More often than not, pragmatism was adopted.

Hyam's thesis is strongest when applied to the post-Suez crisis period, as the next chapter regarding the Macmillan and Douglas-Home governments illustrates. Hyam draws attention to the influence of the United States, Europe and the United Nations in influencing British policy making. The United States continued in its post-war role as Britain's patron, offering 'supportive advice and unwelcome irritation in equal measure' (p. 301). Europe supplied Britain with a potential alternative to Commonwealth, while the growing representation of former colonial territories in the United Nations placed world opinion firmly on the side of decolonisation in the remaining colonial territories. To Hyam, these influences were particularly profound between October 1959 and October 1964 when Macmillan's much cited 'wind of change' became gale force. In the post-Suez period it was increasingly important for the West to keep the newly decolonized states out of the ambit of the Eastern bloc countries. Hyam eruditely demonstrates the influence of international politics on British colonial policy.

Britain's Declining Empire is a well written and very readable account that benefits from extensive archival research of British government documents. Its strength, however, is also its main weakness. The lack of any non-metropolitan archival sources naturally subjects colonial voices to a metropolitan filter. This is unfortunate, but perhaps understandable in a general survey, as it would have been interesting to see how nationalist movements used international opinion to advance their aims. That said, this book provides an invaluable source for students of British decolonisation. Hyam's masterly grasp of the literature provides a thorough update of recent scholarship and is a valuable addition to the current standard accounts of decolonisation by L. J. Butler, John Darwin and Robert Holland.

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