

## Reviews

**Hyam, Ronald, *Understanding the British Empire*, Cambridge 2010, 552 pages**

It is unquestionable that Professor Ronald Hyam ranks amongst the most outstanding British historians and that his works, along with those by Oxford's historian William Roger Louise, are considered almost obligatory for the British Empire studies. As an emeritus fellow of Magdalene College at the University of Cambridge, Ronald Hyam specializes in the history of the British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and is the author of several dozens of scientific studies and monographs. He also edited several collective monographs dealing with the British presence in Africa with a particular regard to the history of the South African Union before the First World War, and to the decolonization process and the subsequent break-up of the British African Empire in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hyam's scientific work does not only follow the political history of the British Empire, but also the social history, including such problems as sexuality of the white and the black races<sup>1</sup> or the colonial administration and service.<sup>2</sup>

*Understanding the British Empire* draws attention of the readership thanks to the title itself on the one hand and its quite non-conventional subjects on the other. Hyam himself meant his most recent work as a way to celebrate the 50 years of his writing on the British Empire history and he considers the book a sort of swansong of his publication activity. In order to contain such a complex organism as the British Empire, Hyam says, it is, however, necessary to consider the governments' political decisions affecting the overseas territories, and to thoroughly examine local sexuality in the context of other communities and traditions. Hyam's book, also possibly – and more appropriately - treated as 'collected works' or a 'collection of essays', cannot be positively put to the category of ordinary publications, for its nonconventional contents defy 'traditional' writings on the British Empire.

The monograph *Understanding the British Empire* focuses on six comprehensive themes, covering mostly African history, – the economical and geopolitical development, the ethics and religions, the colonial policies and administration, significant personalities, sexuality and imperial historiography. Hyam believes that these subjects make mere parts of what put together represents the British Empire and that at the same time, these parts express the Empire's true nature.

The first four chapters cover the geopolitical and economic development of the Empire mostly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and analyze the 'imperial dimension' of Britain, which, according to Hyam, held an advantageous position of an insular margin of Europe, providing the country with a considerable political and economic edge. The author also critically revisits the 'imperial greatness', which in his eyes represents rather an artificially made myth based on skilful manipulation with controlled nations than a truly homogenous and strong whole. Hyam points out that the Empire cannot be by any means qualified as a unified multilateral community, but rather a conglomerate or heterogeneous communities made up

1 HYAM, R., *Empire and Sexual Opportunity*, in: *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 14, 1986, pp. 34–90.

2 HYAM, R., *Concubinage and the Colonial Service: The Crewe Circular (1909)*, in: *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 14, 1986, pp. 170–186.

of several bilateral relations of diverging intensity. At the same time, he points out that laying undersea cables and interconnecting the until then distant parts of the vast Empire was an important unifying step. As he sees to it, the British Empire could only achieve its greatness thanks to its historically determined geographical dimensions, i.e. the ideal combination of densely populated territories (India) and a large quantity of the sparsely populated ones (costal enclaves, islands).

The following two chapters of the second part deal with ethical and religious aspects that had an impact on the Empire. The first one analyzes the slave trade question and the anti-slavery movement, which had been on the rise since the 1830s and in which the British gradually took the lead. The second chapter deals with ethical dimensions of missions founding, the missionary activities, and the overall Christianization tendencies within the British Empire. The third subject matter, dedicated to colonial policies and administration, is based mostly on government records and materials from the *Colonial Office*. The three chapters of the third part analyze the imperial bureaucracy and internal running of the *Colonial Office*. The part also deals with Attlee's Labour administrations which formed the background of the life story and professional career of John Sloman Bennett, a less known, yet unavoidable colonial official in the post-war Empire decolonization. His influence on the African policies in the *Colonial Office* is often compared to that of Sir Henry Percy Anderson at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The fourth part, I dare say, is a particularly interesting and beneficial one, dealing with the era's both "great men" and their influence on the shaping and orientations of the British Empire. Historical works on the 'heroes of the Empire' such as General Charles George Gordon, Cecil Rhodes, or Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener are quite common, for the importance of individuals on the imperial history is substantial, especially when it comes to Sir Winston Churchill and Jan Christian Smuts. For the majority, Winston Churchill may represent the wartime leader from the Second World War period, which also makes him the greatest Briton in the eyes of many. However, Hyam reveals a less known period of Churchill's life in the chapters on his actions in the colonial sphere as the Under-Secretary of State in the Colonial Office before the First World War and the Secretary of State for the Colonies shortly at the beginning of the 1920s. Hyam views Churchill from a broader perspective than the limited point of view of mere imperial policies. He clearly points out that Churchill's opinion on the Empire had been developing from his juvenile late-Victorian enthusiasm that can be found in his early works<sup>3</sup> to a rational point of view on the country orientation following the international circumstances and post-war decolonization tendencies. It is also interesting to read Hyam's analysis of the peculiar and sometimes uneasy relationship of Great Britain and South Africa as shown on the case of Jan Christian Smuts, a prominent South African politician. Although Smuts started his career as a general fighting against the Britons in the second Anglo-Boer War, he later identified with the British Empire and along with Louis Botha he became the factual creator of the South African Union. It is true that he significantly contributed (and historians believe that in a positive way) to the institutional metamorphosis of the British Empire after the First World War; yet his efforts at the end of his life aiming to

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3 *The Story of the Malakand Field-Force* (1898) a *The River War* (1899)

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find a convenient way of coexistence of the black and white brought about the race segregation and partly contributed to the creation of the apartheid, later publicly denounced by the British, when Macmillan's 'wind of change' blew in Britain in the 1960s.

I personally qualify the fifth theme called 'Sexuality' as very succeeded and controversial at the same time, for it clearly shows cultural differences between the Western civilization and local communities in a range of approaches: starting from the search of life partners through occasional sex diversions to female and male prostitution and colonial promiscuity in general. Hyam based this part of the book on a huge quantity of personal notes, journals, and memoirs of British soldiers, officials, or travellers. In the chapter 'Empire and sexual opportunity', Hyam summarizes certain aspects and cases of 'sexual exploitation' committed by the colonizers on the colonized populations in the era of imperial expansion on all continents. The following chapter, called aptly 'Penis envy and 'penile othering' in the colonies and the America', is an interesting essay based on the comparison of two races, where Hyam insists that Europeans were not reluctant to assess the cultural advancement of a subdued nations also from the sexual point of view: e.g., the black super-penises were a sign of beast life rather than of civilization. Hyam supports his own hypothesis with well-known Kinsey's table of estimated length of an erect penis in white men and black men. The following two chapters introduce two case studies of how far the 'sexual exploitation' could go sometimes. The 1909 affair of the notorious womaniser Hubert Silberrad who had lived with several girls bought for forty goats, when serving as a junior colonial official, got the British administration to make a stand against concubinage of colonial servants during the Edwardian era. Although Silberrad's contemporary Ken Searight, a captain of the Indian army, faced a similar charge involving young boys, his case did not have such impact on British colonial service as Silberrad's affair.

The final part consists of two chapters, where Hyam analyzes the development of British imperial historiography and discusses their most important representatives as well as historical schools of Oxbridge. Their results are also mentioned in the section, as well as their vast publication projects (*The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, *a Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*), published magazines (*The Cambridge Historical Journal*) and methodological procedures in 1881-1981. In the first place, Hyam mentions 'the founder of the imperial history', Sir John R. Seeley and his famous work *The Expansion of England* (1883). Other significant historians such as George Macaulay Trevelyan, John Atkinson Hobson, William Keith Hancock, Nicholas Mansergh, William Roger Louis, Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, follow along with their disciples, who were and are the most important representatives of the British imperial historiography. In my opinion, Hyam conceived both chapters as a sort of reflexion on his professors, co-workers or even his potential rivals.

*Understanding the British Empire* is a work of remarkable quality. Unlike many others, the work brings new and not always quite conservative points of view on the British Empire. At the same time, it is to be stressed that Hyam bases his studies on an appreciable archive research, fertile primary sources, and extensive secondary literature. I can warmly recommend

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*Understanding of the British Empire* to all those who wish to read about the British Empire from another than traditional perspective.

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