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The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns' Epic Defense of the British Empire

Bruce Gilley

Regnery Gateway, 2021

"A strong character and sound common sense are far more valuable assets to a colonial officer than the most brilliant academic distinctions."

— Sir Alan Burns, 1949, p. 23.

Professor of political science Bruce Gilley provides a page-turning biography of Sir Alan Cuthbert Maxwell Burns (1887-1980), a British patriot and staunch proponent of the British colonial system that markedly raised the standard of living of underdeveloped peoples. From the lowest rung on the Colonial Administrative Service ladder as a junior revenue officer in his place of birth, St. Kitts, he advanced to positions of increasing responsibility in the Caribbean. During World War I, he commanded colonial African troops in Nigeria. After posts in colonial administration in Nigeria before and following the war, Burns became Colonial Secretary of the Bahamas, Governor of British Honduras (Belize) and, during the Second World War, Governor of the British Gold Coast (Ghana). Following World War II, the US repeated its wartime insistence that its European allies decolonize, while "progressive", anti-colonialism movements prodded reluctant colonialists with terrorism. During this period, Burns served as the Permanent Representative of the UK to the Trusteeship Council, mandated by the UN to create functioning states out of colonial possessions in various degrees of development, and was the sole voice in the UN for patience and gradual independence rather than the flash-independence demanded by the Third World, Communist states and the US.

Highly traveled, and a skilled negotiator, Burns never completed his primary education. Poverty ensued when his father died—Alan was 9. He dropped out of St. Edmund's College (a Catholic boys' school in England) so that his younger brother Emile could attend. Indeed, what helped Burns excel at his job as colonial administrator was not empty learning but hands-on experience and "sound common sense." Today,

“sound common sense” based on observation and deduction is quaint and so “Eurocentric”. The norm in most of academia today is, in fact, empty learning, along with “correct” ideology and groupthink. These traits well-describe modern social scientists, who uniformly state that no good whatsoever came from European colonialism.¹

Gilley points out that Burns faithfully served the interest of the British government. By the late nineteenth century, British goal were to transition colonies to independent states with constitutional governance while raising standards of living. To achieve these goals, the colonial administrators were to provide the needed knowledge and training for constitutional governance and to oversee the development of infrastructure. Over time, the natives will try their hand at running and maintaining their own government and Burns encouraged local participation—with not a little apprehension from other colonial administrators and the colonial office. Whatever colonial post he was assigned, Burns was not even slightly interested in race—he believed that all people have the capacity for European style self-governance. Burns was a “liberal imperialist” or, as Gilley puts it, a “liberal internationalist”. The appellation is fitting in that Burns viewed his mission of promoting standards of living and constitutional governance as not only a worthy but a colonial aspiration, to the benefit of all regardless of race.

Gilley repeatedly notes that the British colonial system, as exemplified by Sir Burns, was even-handed— a claim that drives “progressive” anti-colonialists apoplectic. Indeed, Gilley had previously argued that European colonialism was, in general, administered fairly, raised standards of living and was positively received by the natives.² The rapid collapse of the rule of law and ensuing violence engulfing those colonies that were abruptly handed independence underscores Gilley’s, and Burns’, point. What did “Western progressives” do in the 1960s and 1970s with newly independent countries soaked in the blood of millions, with European colonialists nowhere in sight? They merely shrugged, Gilley notes, dismissing genocide as the “price of freedom”. “No one in the West seemed to care” about some of the “most horrific events in human history,” as long as “there were no pith-hatted Colonel

¹Sanderson, S.K. (2022). *Race and Evolution*. West Jordan, UT: Family Heritage Publishers.

²Gilley, B. (2018). The case for colonialism. *Academic Questions* 31: 167-185.

Blimps [a negative British caricature] on hand.” Based on their actions, one could argue that progressives are merely concerned with protecting their ideology rather than actually caring for human beings—Gilley suggests that it is progressives who engage in a form of “holocaust denial” by understating the human misery following decolonization.³

Both Gilley’s book and his previous paper defending European colonialism stated clear facts exposing the vacuousness of the mainstream media and orthodox academic narrative, that European colonialism was of zero benefit to the natives. Gilley’s paper evoked protest by thousands of so-called academics. Almost half of the journal’s editorial board fled in horror, lest they be contaminated by Gilley’s “hate speech”.⁴ In the spirit of the time, the Editor cancelled Gilley’s paper. The Editor claimed to have received “credible death threats”, perhaps demonstrating that the sword is mightier than the pen. Gilley also received death threats and attacks to his professional competence. So Imams are not the only ones who issue *fatwas* against those who dare to blaspheme the holy narrative.

Burns did live long enough to see the disastrous results of Third World independence, especially in Ghana and Nigeria, wherein he had served. In 1966, an army general involved in overthrowing of Kwame Nkumah (Ghana’s authoritarian first President) stated, “The British handed over to us a decent system of government in which everyone had a say. But the country had been corrupted.” Nkumah had ruled Ghana since its independence in 1957 as a fiefdom for himself and his cronies and as a prison for his opponents. In 1972, Burns related that his “faith in the future of Nigeria has not been shaken by the tragic events of the last few years.” Burns was indeed a “liberal internationalist” to the end. He pinned the ensuing humanitarian disasters on both those “who had ceded power too quickly” and on those who ended up in charge, who received varying levels of educational and financial support from communist states and Western communists. Interestingly, one Western communist who published anti-British colonialism propaganda and trained future anti-colonialists was Emile, Alan’s brother, an executive member of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

³Gilley, B. (2022). The case for colonialism: A response to my critics. *Academic Questions* 35: 89-126.

⁴Gilley, B. (2022). *ibid.*

Another interesting revelation in Gilley's book demonstrates the lackadaisical attitude that underlay Winston Churchill's famous commitment to the British Empire, from his early political career as Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies to his time as Prime Minister. Consider Churchill's rhetorical rejection of President Franklin Roosevelt's proposal at Yalta to have the British Empire placed under UN control, refusing the idea of the UN's "fumbling fingers" prying into the life of the British Empire. Though not expressly a rejection of the "Atlantic Charter", he'd signed four years before (in which the US and the UK had claimed to "respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live;" wishing "to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them..."), these gestures certainly lack coherence. In the 1940, Burns was tasked by Churchill to negotiate US access to British bases in the Caribbean and Newfoundland in exchange for 50 American destroyers. The Americans did not want to merely rent the bases but demanded complete sovereignty; Burns successfully closed negotiations on terms more favorable to Britain, Canada and the Empire, the US passing the destroyers to the UK, bypassing US neutrality laws and a decidedly noninterventionist Congress—Burns received both the US's and Churchill's gratitude. A year later, however, when Burns, as Governor of Ghana, protested deplorable behavior by American soldiers stationed within Ghana, Churchill, states Gilley, told Burns to "stand down," ostensibly for the sake of preserving good US-UK relations. By 1947, Churchill had completely turned his back on his beloved Empire, undermining British prestige and authority in Ghana, and perhaps the rest of the Empire, by second-guessing the judgment of colonial governor Burns. Perhaps Churchill was in fact a merely political animal, wandering with the tide, regardless of where it took him.

Gilley contends that colonies that were under colonial rule were better-off in the long run, "overwhelmingly richer, democratic, more liberal and more peaceful" compared to those under shorter colonial rule or to regions never colonized. To Gilley's credit, he examines history with an empirical eye as he enumerates "the things that matter and then to assign them weights, which presumably vary with time and

place.”⁵ He also asks “what would likely have happened in a given place absent of colonial rule?” While anti-colonialists decry colonialism, their bleating ends on that note—they have no seriously considered counterargument. With respect to this question, Burns frequently observed that the alternative to British colonialism was a Hobbesian “poor, nasty, brutish and short” life.

As to whether previous European colonial administration provided a long-term benefit for African countries, this is not entirely clear from an empirical standpoint. Given the current sociopolitical and economic state of African countries, it is difficult to discern any difference between countries that underwent colonial administration or whether duration of colonial administration quantitatively affected standards of living following independence. Sub-Saharan African countries score highest in the Fragility State Index (FSI) compared to Western Europe and Northeast Asia. The FSI is “based on 12 indicators ... of social cohesion, politics, economics and social organization.”⁶ A high FSI score indicates weak central government with “little practical control over its territory.” If one were to sort countries by race (European or African), black countries have much higher FSI scores than European countries.

Aside from historical and social development, there are other potential explanations as to why some countries have higher socioeconomic standing (SES) than other countries, such as average national intelligence (IQ). Tangible socioeconomic measures such as gross domestic product (GDP), literacy, and life expectancy are positively correlated with IQ. At the same time, social behaviors such as welfare dependency, criminality, illegitimacy and divorce are negatively correlated with IQ.⁷ The tendency to respect law and authority, and conscientiousness and other behavioral traits and IQ are in part genetically mediated, as observed from numerous family, twin and adoption studies.⁸

One other variable that could explain why some countries have high SES and why others are perennial recipients of UN and IMF economic aid is race. On average, blacks have lower intelligence than

⁵Gilley, B. (2022). *ibid.*

⁶Sanderson, S.K. (2022). *ibid.*

⁷Herrnstein, R.J. & Murray, C. (1994). *The Bell Curve*. NY, NY: Free Press.

⁸Plomin, R. (2018). *Blueprint*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

whites.⁹ Correlations between economic and social well-being indexes decrease with darker skin coloration, suggesting lighter skinned (and higher IQ) individuals have greater economic outcomes and health than darker skinned (and lower IQ) individuals. Percentage of a country's population who are black negatively correlates with GDP, literacy and life expectancy. The low average IQ of black countries and greater social dysfunctions, such as crime, poverty and illegitimacy, interact to produce highly fragile states that require constant international supervision. There are other behavioral traits that appear to be more common in blacks than in Europeans and Asians, which may also work to decrease national well-being.¹⁰ However, whether colonialism is a significant variable when analyzed in conjunction with race, national cognitive ability and other psychological traits has yet to be fully explored.

Perhaps this question will not get the full hearing that it deserves, since cultures reflect a peoples' evolved behavioral traits. Cultures could be viewed as social adaptations to a given environment. That constitutional governance did not take firm hold in Africa could be due to a lack of a social equivalent in tribal African culture—or that Africans were quite satisfied to have someone else run an alien sociopolitical structure for them. Whatever the intrinsic or extrinsic reason, should we not be more objective when exploring colonial histories? Imposing our own values on the truth does not facilitate the uncovering of truth.¹¹ What some are doing is smothering truth with values, in the hope of killing it.

Aldric Hama

⁹Sanderson, S.K. (2022). *ibid.* East Asians, on average, have higher IQ than Europeans and Africans. When considering national leaders, one should consider the right-tail of the IQ curve, those with much higher than average IQ. It may not be surprising to most that the intellectual elite, entrusted with the power of the state by the common people, use this power to further their own agenda, thereby abusing the trust of the common people, who probably don't know any better or are content with the way things are.

¹⁰Sanderson, S.K. (2022). *ibid.*

¹¹<https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/35/2/the-faith-of-science>