

The New Criterion

Books April 2022

Good faith impugned

by *Barnaby Crowcroft*

A review of The Last Imperialist Sir Alan Burns's Epic Defense of the British Empire by Bruce Gilley.

A few years ago, at a conference in England on the history of empire, we had a lecture by a retired civil servant who had once served as the governor of one of Britain's few remaining overseas territories. He was describing his experiences responding to some minor constitutional crisis, when a mob of local protestors had descended upon his pocket-sized Government House and he panicked, frantically calling colleagues in London for advice to try to muddle through to some acceptable solution. When the talk was over, a young scholar on my left—an expert (no doubt) on Imperialist Racist Fascists—turned to me, eyes wide with astonishment, head gently shaking, and said: “You know, I’d just never thought that the British colonialists were people, before.”

Perhaps this can go some way toward explaining the unhappy fate of Bruce Gilley, the political science professor at Portland State University who has become a lightning rod in debates over empire. In 2017, Gilley published an eight-thousand-word defense of Britain's colonial past in a peer-reviewed academic journal, arguing that the empire tended to do more good than harm in its colonies and that much worse was to follow its premature decolonization. The result was pandemonium. The journal's editorial board resigned en masse. Its editor received “serious and credible threats of personal violence.” An online petition charging Gilley with being (among other things) a “White Supremacist” gained thousands of signatures. And the journal's publisher obligingly popped “A Case for Colonialism” down the memory hole.

In 2020, Gilley tried again, this time with a full-length scholarly biography of a twentieth-century British colonial governor based on original documents. But the result was another online petition and social-media campaign that successfully pressured his publisher, Rowman & Littlefield, to scrap the book just weeks before its slated release. The triumphant petitions are still available online and are classics of the genre, right down to their bad grammar and illegible academic nomenclature. Comments by signatories include: “Bruce Gilley is dangerous,” “Akin to Holocaust denial,” and “I am so

sick of white people.” (My personal favorite though, is from Saad Sheikh in Uttar Pradesh: “I will never sign[,] piss off.”)

The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns’s Epic Defense of the British Empire has now appeared anyway, thanks to Regnery Gateway, and it is difficult to see how anyone could view the book as anything other than a contribution to the scholarship. Alan Burns, who has never received biographical study, will be unknown to most readers, but he was an omnipresent figure in the final decades of empire. He was a reforming West African governor, an outspoken British envoy at the United Nations, and the author of several very successful books—and he achieved all this, Gilley reveals, despite leaving school at sixteen and never attending university. Or perhaps “because of.” His brother Emile attended Cambridge University and went on to become a communist, a leading Soviet propagandist, and the convener of a Marxist training school for anti-colonial revolutionaries. (Naturally.)

The Burnses were natives of the colonial Caribbean, where their Scottish ancestors had immigrated in the early nineteenth century. In 1900, the British West Indies were one of the empire’s most neglected “slums,” and the young Alan started out in some of its lowliest jobs: acting harbormaster at St. Kitts, junior legal clerk in the Leeward Islands, etc. His background probably explains his lifelong preoccupations with modernizing reform and race relations, interests by no means common among British colonialists of his generation. He received his big break nine years into his career, when he was transferred to the colonial service of Nigeria, the largest British territory outside India. After active military service against the Germans in the Cameroons in the First World War, Burns rose rapidly through the colonial hierarchy in Lagos and published the first modern history of Nigeria, which was to remain continually in print for the next forty years.

Following his colonial career offers a panorama of the interwar years as seen from backwaters of the world, a view one could never find in a conventional history of the twentieth century—and Burns always seemed to arrive in a place as it was passing through some minor golden age: the Bahamas in the 1920s, when Prohibition in the United States brought the islands a huge windfall from liquor smuggling and booze-fueled tourism; British Honduras (modern-day Belize) in the 1930s, when a “Maya Craze” was gripping the country following several major archaeological expeditions; the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) in the 1940s, when it was among the wealthiest provinces of the empire and when some of colonial Africa’s great post-war political figures were launching their careers. In each assignment, Burns’s colonialism was characterized by his engagement with local legislatures, ambitious infrastructure investments, and other acts—such as the founding of public libraries or museums—that we today understand as “nation-building.”

The book’s real achievement, however, is its account of Burns’s nine years as the British representative to the United Nations’ Trusteeship Council (later known as the Fourth Committee), responsible for providing oversight of the world’s remaining colonies. Burns arrived in New York in 1947, priding himself on his record as the most

progressive colonial governor in the British service. In his view, the whole purpose of empire was to foster economic development and political independence in its colonies. Yet in a United Nations dominated by ideological anti-colonialism, where all and any European involvement in rule overseas was viewed as inherently illegitimate and to be ended as soon as possible—whatever the consequences—he was as good as a hidebound reactionary. He wrote bitterly to London in December 1952 (in words Gilley might have written from the American academy in 2022):

Our good work has been ignored, our good faith impugned, and we have been made to feel that we are regarded by the Committee as criminals, on trial for our crimes, not as colleagues with the same ideals, working towards the same ends.

What is so brilliant about what Gilley calls “Alan Burns’s Epic Defense of the British Empire” is less what Burns said in favor of the empire than his trenchant attack on the United Nations system that was replacing it. He became known in the committee for the merciless *tu quoque* challenges he posed against the United Nations’ member states who were purporting to lead the charge against colonialism, such as when, for example, the Soviet Union faulted the British Empire for its record on democratization, Yemen and Mexico (where women could not vote) criticized its provisions for women’s rights, or Iraq called out its treatment of ethnic minorities. The United Nations, he said, was less some “conscience of mankind” than an egregious international hypocrisy machine, creating a whole new world in which political legitimacy was not based on good governance at home but on rhetorical anti-colonialism on the world stage. Burns left New York in 1956, before (he claimed) he said something that would get him fired.

Gilley’s critics sought to discredit his work because of the political motives supposed to compromise his scholarship and because he lacked proper training in postcolonial studies. In fact, what makes *The Last Imperialist* so valuable is precisely that it is so completely un beholden to the usual (deeply political) academic catechism of writing on colonialism. As such, it is packed with striking and yet obvious historical truths one might never encounter elsewhere. For example: that migration flows throughout Burns’s colonial career were almost always out of neighboring independent countries and into British colonies (from Haiti to the Bahamas, from Guatemala to British Honduras, from mainland China to Hong Kong, etc.), rather than vice versa—people can be said to have “voted with their feet” over the empire; that mapmaking, archaeology, and the building of public works such as museums and libraries was not—as an entire academic cottage industry exists to tell us—collectively the “most hidden and deadly instrument of colonialism,” but something generally appreciated by colonial subjects; that political detention under British imperialism was usually to be preferred to that after “colonial freedom” had been achieved—not Gilley’s point, but one that tended to be made by the West African opposition leaders who experienced both; that British colonial rule must have been viewed as legitimate by a great many of its subjects over large portions of the world—if not, then we cannot explain the outpourings of patriotic support it received at the moments of its greatest weakness, such as during the world wars. In a truly open debate over the historical legacies of empire, all these are things

that would invite further study and reflection. In ours, merely to state them is enough to have any author called out as the purveyor of “extremist content.”

But if *The Last Imperialist* is, as its jacket tells us, “history writing at its most courageous,” it is still not history at its best. Gilley’s case for colonialism rests upon the idea—repeated *ad nauseam*—that the British Empire was the agent of some “universal civilization” that exported “Western liberalism” throughout the world. True, this may have been how Alan Burns viewed the empire, and how it was repackaged after 1945 for American consumption. But just as many British imperialists, over a much longer period, had viewed the greatness of Britain’s empire quite differently. For them, what made Britain’s empire so great was precisely that it did not export its way of life or system of government to its subjects (unlike the French), which is why so many of them continue to live under the rule of Indian hereditary princes, Arab Islamic sultans, and African tribal chieftains.

This empire has been brought to life vividly in works such as David Cannadine’s 2001 study *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*. Its values were not liberal or progressive but traditional and conservative: alliance and protection, loyalty and toleration, religious faith and social hierarchy. Burns’s liberal sensitivities were offended when he came face-to-face with the realities of this empire; his tenure as the governor of the Gold Coast was overshadowed by the almost religious zeal with which he went after the customary kingship practices of some of Britain’s most important chiefly allies. (The same spirit caused the failure of his last, post-retirement assignment to help design a new constitution for Fiji in 1960–61.) But that’s probably why he ended his career in the 1950s not as the governor of one of Britain’s great remaining colonies—Nigeria, Malaya, or the Sudan—but as a diplomat at the United Nations tasked with defending the empire to people whose politics were not so very different from his own.

So, for all the credit that is certainly due to *The Last Imperialist* for its contributions to the scholarship, and to Professor Gilley personally for his valiant efforts fighting the culture wars, one can’t help feeling that we’ve heard quite enough interpretations of the British Empire packaged for political progressives. After all, the fruits of such applied history lessons in “Liberal Imperialism” can be witnessed today in Iraq and Afghanistan. What we really need to hear more about now—and, for those so inclined, to celebrate—is the British Empire that was run for so long, and on such a shoestring budget, by political “reactionaries.”

Barnaby Crowcroft is a fellow at the Freie Universität Berlin, a visiting lecturer at the Austrian Diplomatic Academy, and an associate of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Applied History program.