



American Thinker

January 12, 2022

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Alone at the Twilight of Empire

By [Jesse Russell](#)

In his 1781 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson famously reminded those Americans who dismissed the Amerindians they were in the process of subjugating as irredeemably savage that their own Northern European ancestors were likewise considered irredeemably savage by the Romans who had conquered them.

However, through the process of civilization at the hands of the Romans, themselves tutored by the Greeks, Northern Europeans went on to build mighty cultures.

Jefferson's understanding of the power of civilization to transform a seemingly savage people had existed in the West for centuries and served as at least one of the platforms of Western colonization.

Jefferson's view is abhorrent to much of contemporary political discourse, which considers colonialization as being equivalent to genocide -- except, of course, if a nonwestern power conquers another people, such as the 8th-century Arab conquest of Spain, which is often, if not always depicted, as a good and noble act.

Portland State University's Dr. Bruce Gilley learned this lesson the hard way when his September 2017 article, "[The Case for Colonialism](#)," published in *Third World Quarterly*, drew incredible scorn, including death threats from angry readers.

Not to be deterred, Gilley has published a recent work detailing the life of one of the last defenders of colonialism, Sir Alan Burns.

Gilley's book, titled [*The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns' Epic Defense of the British Empire*](#) is a crushing broadside against the left-wing celebration of decolonialization.

The Last Imperialist accomplishes this goal, curiously, by demonstrating how Alan Burns was a thoroughly liberal and anti-racist administrator concerned with the wellbeing of those whom he governed in the colonies.

Alan Burns lived a *Tintin*-like life. He was being born and raised in the British Caribbean -- and, strangely for a British colonial administrator, Burns was a Catholic. Burns later spent his career fighting against the Germans in Togoland as part of the West Africa Frontier Force and eventually served in colonial administration in British Honduras, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria.

In *The Last Imperialist*, Gilley provides a vision of colonial life that has long vanished. In the life of Sir Alan Burns, we encounter colonial officials driven mad by isolation, revolutionary Nigerian cult leaders claiming to be the second Elijah, and Bahamian bootleggers. We further encounter in Gilley's well-wrought pages black nationalist Marcus Garvey, the infamous Nigerian Women's War, and stories (perhaps too racy for the reader with a chaster muse) of adulterous love affairs between colonial administrators and native women.

Like American president Richard M. Nixon after him, Alan Burns was a conservative "liberal," who believed in the Enlightenment credo of human rights as well as (contrary to both left- and right-wing racialists) a common humanity shared by all human beings. While serving in the Bahamas, Burns celebrated Emancipation Day, which commemorated the end of slavery on the tropical island. As Gilley notes, Alan firmly believed that the same institutions that "civilized" Europe could do so for the rest of the world. He founded a Carnegie library in Lagos, Nigeria, and encouraged diverse social gathers to ease tensions. He further brought African members into the Gold Coast Legislature while serving as the colony's governor.

Throughout *The Last Imperialist*, Gilley contrasts revolutionary countries such as Guatemala and Haiti with other countries with a stronger colonial government such as British Honduras and the Bahamas. Gilley's central point is that colonialism stabilized and strengthened colonials while the much-trumpeted revolutionary wars frequently led to chaos and death.

This is not to argue that colonialism is without its mistakes -- a point Alan Burns himself noted.

The murder of an African tribal priest by eight prominent men, often known as the *Ju-Ju* murder, proved to be one of the most difficult moments in Alan's career as he battled with both African and English politicians to attempt to enforce what he perceived to be justice. For Alan, the *Ju-Ju* murder was symptomatic of the barbarism that "civilization" was attempting to end in the Third World and which it had allegedly ended (or at least tamed) in Europe.

Sir Alan Burns' remaining years were spent battling an increasingly radicalized and anti-colonial United Nations as the British Empire retreated and handed the baton of Western Civilization to the United States.

As Gilley himself hints, what is most frightening about the current discussion of colonialism is the complete absence of truth and honesty from the new wave of left-wing historians.

Gilley demonstrates that many radicals in the developing world privately were able to express their admiration for various elements of colonialism but were unable to voice such support publicly for obvious reasons.

Gilley also marshals quotes from such noted writers as Octavio Paz, V.S. Naipaul, and Chinua Achebe in praise of some elements of colonialism.

However, rational, documented arguments for colonialism do not matter in a time in which the criterion for correctness is no longer truth and the standard for rightness is not justice but rather the will to power and violence.