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In Defence of Defending Empire: Why Are Anti-Colonialists Suppressing a Book Instead of Challenging It?

BY **ROBERT TOMBS**

Professor Robert Tombs is a Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, and the author of *The English and Their History*

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Within living memory, writing the biography of an obscure colonial official would have been considered towards the unremarkable end of the academic spectrum. The sort of worthy scholarly chore undertaken by some unambitious don in the twilight of his career, and published by a dutiful university press that would run off a few hundred copies, destined to lie undisturbed on the shelves of faculty libraries. But today, it is the sort of thing that gets you cancelled and earns you death threats — and that academic presses, intimidated by their own staff, shun like the plague.

Bruce Gilley, Professor of Political Science at Portland State University, first had a taste of such treatment in 2017, when he published a now famous, or notorious, article entitled, "The Case for Colonialism". It was peer reviewed and published by a reputable scholarly journal. But then came the storm: a collective letter signed by hundreds of colleagues denounced him; editors of the journal resigned; terrified publishers pleaded with him to withdraw the article to protect them from possible violence; and abuse and death threats came flying his way.

What was his crime? To suggest, in careful and moderate terms (judge for yourselves — the piece is available here), that European empires did some good. And that some similar arrangement, through which advanced democracies might adopt some of the duties of government in failed states, might do some good today. Of course, one could object that not all European empires were benevolent or effective. One could equally suggest that few

(or no) developed countries would be willing to shoulder the burdens of quasi-colonial government today. Many, even most, people might think Gilley's ideas one-sided or unrealistic. So what? Debate — often heated — has for centuries been the way we have advanced knowledge and reached agreed position: thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

But Gilley was not being offered debate. He was being threatened and silenced, labelled a heretic. Needless to say, this has become a familiar sight in Western academic life. Fortunately, he seems to have a secure tenured position; and admirably, he seems not to be easily intimidated. His new book, *The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns' Epic Defense of the British Empire*, takes the battle to a different level. "The Case for Colonialism" was a general survey: a birds-eye view of empire. A biography, of course, is the opposite: a worms-eye view from the grassroots.

Burns, who died in 1980 at the age of 92, was a distinguished man in his field, and a witty and dedicated public servant. But he was not a maker of high policy or an intellectual of wide influence. I had never heard of him; I expect few historians have. This, of course, is part of the attraction, if you want to show what governing the British Empire meant in everyday terms — not the view from Whitehall, but from an office in Nassau, a mud hut in Benin, or ultimately Christiansborg Castle in Accra. Burns started at the bottom of the colonial administration, as a 17-year-old junior revenue officer in St Kitts, and he ended as Governor of the Gold Coast. He was a true son of empire, born in the Caribbean, one of that rather small occupational class (his father was a local official), who for a few decades managed the largest empire in history on a shoestring.

Perhaps Gilley was drawn to Burns because he was "the last man" to make a principled defence of empire, as his career drew to an end at the United Nations. "It is the fashion today to decry colonialism," Burns wrote in his memoirs, "but it has saved millions of people from worse evils … slavery and human sacrifice, corrupt judges and tyrannical chiefs, famine and disease." Merely to say this is to break a contemporary taboo: "on balance, we have nothing to be ashamed of." But Gilley clearly agrees.

He goes further in this lively, accessible, often amusing and frequently exciting story: he hammers home facts that outrage the "woke" consensus on colonialism. That many of its peoples wanted to be part of the empire. That they were proud to be colonial subjects. That opposition to colonial rule was rarer than the desire for more of it. That its peoples showed loyalty, even to the point of fighting for it. That officials like Burns were popular with the people they governed.

One small episode is intriguing in today's context. As reforming governor of poverty-stricken British Honduras (now Belize) in the 1930s, Burns got the British Museum to return

Mayan relics that had been recently discovered by a British doctor and sent to London. His plan was to set up a local museum to foster Mayan self-respect: “We see that the people have their bread but too often forget to let them have some butter with it”. The colonial government in Ceylon repatriated the royal regalia of the pre-colonial Kandy kingdom for similar reasons. But Burns never regarded the acquisition of these artefacts as theft. The Mayan ones, for instance, had been saved from oblivion.

Over the course of the period covered by Gilley’s book, and Burns’s career, the empire reached its apogee and its end. Two world wars and then the Cold War shattered its foundations. Burns became governor of the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1941, surrounded by Vichy-controlled territory. The colonies proved, he wrote, “true loyal friends” at this time: had they wished “to push us into the sea there was little to prevent them.” Instead, they provided donations for Spitfires and volunteers for the army. Visiting Americans were astonished that Burns travelled the country without a bodyguard.

But Burns knew that the war meant the days of British rule were numbered. He was to face growing political opposition. Bizarrely, his worst problem stemmed from a case of ritual human sacrifice. The victim had been gruesomely slaughtered to mark the accession of a new chief. Important men were involved. Nevertheless, the authorities arrested the murderers, who were sentenced to death. Burns supported severity — he regarded human sacrifice, which still lingered on, as something he had a duty to suppress. But the case became politicised, opposition led by a nationalist lawyer, Joseph Danquah, who won support in Westminster against what was presented as excessive colonial harshness. Even Churchill denounced Burns.

More broadly, nationalist opposition, though limited in its popular support, acquired backing not only in Britain, but internationally. Burns foresaw all this. Indeed, he had long understood his task as being to prepare for independence, and had tried to reduce racial inequality. He forcefully promoted “Africanization”. But he believed that *premature* independence would endanger “the mass of the population”, especially if the Soviet Union (or indeed the Americans) weighed in.

Gilley begins his book with a poignant story that encapsulates the tragedy that ensued after the British released the reins in 1957. Burns’s erstwhile opponent, Danquah, who had seemed destined to rule Ghana, soon ended up in prison under the new dictator Kwame Nkrumah. The darling of Western progressives, feted by John F Kennedy and decorated by the Soviet Union, Nkrumah caused the economy of Ghana, hitherto Africa’s richest country, to collapse. Shortly before Danquah died of ill treatment in 1965, he wrote to Nkrumah from prison about justice and compassion, reminding him that:

“it was our people’s love of justice that compelled them to ask the British in 1843 to come back to Ghana … Now the British people have gone away … and already some people are asking … “Is this justice?”’

This, then, is potentially a very controversial book — unless Gilley’s adversaries manage to have it written off as the work of a lone extremist, published by an obscure press and hence systematically ignored. There is an interesting story behind its publication — of at least one contract rescinded by a mainstream publisher after protests by their staff.

But why has the subject of empire become so explosive that a minority voice like Gilley’s must be silenced? If his general argument about empires were obviously false, it would be easy to refute. If his scholarship on Burns were faulty, the book could be effectively criticised. The orthodox view in academe today — that the empire was essentially repressive, exploitative, racist, violent, destructive, and so on — is backed up by numbers, research funding, and patronage. Even though its scholarship and intellectual bases are sometimes embarrassingly shoddy, it is in no danger of being overthrown.

But this is clearly not the point. Anger is aroused by Gilley’s work not because what he says is false, but because much of it is evidently true. Scholarship aside, mere common sense suggests that a system as huge as the British Empire, which the Cambridge scholar Ronald Hyam describes as “a global mosaic of almost ungraspable complexity and staggering contrasts,” must have had some good effects. Perhaps those idealistic young people who volunteered for the colonial service, like Burns, were sometimes arrogant or naïve. But they often worked hard and selflessly to keep the peace, create economic development, provide medical treatment, build infrastructure and promote education. As Gilley’s book shows, they believed they were making the world a better place.

This is what cannot be admitted. It explodes the idea of the British empire as purely violent exploitation. It exposes the fragility of nationalist myths about struggles for freedom. Above all, it undermines the view that empire created a permanent legacy of racial oppression that still weighs on us today.