

# Education and the end of Glorious Empire



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*'Imperial nostalgia is not only a feeling but a catalyst. It takes social discontent and transforms it into a dangerous form of political tribalism' (1) 'Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit id est semper esse puerum' (To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child) / (Cicero. Orations 46 BC)*

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*The sun is finally setting on the British Empire.*

The empire still exists in the Honours and Awards system, one of which is The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, but the pomp and circumstance that surrounds them has withered. The empire still exists in its Commonwealth remnants: an organisational grouping that has no army of its own as such, and with which Prince Charles can be trusted. However, if it were truly important then a citizen of India would have been appointed its next head. The British Empire still exists in a myriad of popular imaginations ranging those who rail against its crimes, to those who are oblivious to them and hanker after its second coming (Empire 2.0).

The crimes of the Empire are not hard to list. From famines that should never have been allowed to occur (of which the famous Bengal famine was merely the last of several), to deliberate massacres (of which Amritsar is perhaps the best known). The current long and contentious discussions over the form that Brexit and future global trade will take demonstrates a reluctance to engage not only with our past, but also with the 21st century realities of our future. While there were many reasons why a majority voted to leave the EU in 2016, an imperial nostalgia- a yearning for the days when Britain really did rule the waves, albeit through force, was an important factor, particularly for many in the ruling classes.

In 2017 former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson published his 'Vision for a bold and thriving Britain after Brexit' which he claimed would include free trade deals with former colonies (2). Nostalgia for lost imperial glories is not confined to Britain but forms the background for much populist appeal by right wing parties and fascist groups in the UK. So where does education fit in to all this? It is partly that school and higher education has been complicit in underpinning imperial nostalgia. What was learned in educational institutions over decades actively created and supported the world view of a few in the elite and many older voters. This is now being exploited to support a narrow exclusive nationalism.

The high point and final expansion of the British empire (1870-1930), ultimately embracing well over 100 colonies, dominions and protectorates, coincided with the development of mass British education, '*education for the masses at home*'. During this period much of what future politicians would later describe as British culture and values, became reflected in the curriculum. These values were not traditional at all but were created and then spread by British educators and imperial propaganda into popular consciousness. The world view was one in

which militarism, xenophobia, racial arrogance, and beliefs that the 'British race' had a particular superiority over the rest of the world was dominant. William Beveridge, author of the 1942 report which resulted in a Welfare State, advised middle class British women to have four children for the good of the British 'race' and thus the good of the world as he saw the British middle class as naturally and eugenically superior.

Britain had control of all those millions of people overseas. Popular newspapers and social media contributions through to the present day present the moral superiority and offensive views of many British writers as natural and legitimate. Self-confidently lording it over others appear to underpin this version of traditional British values. The legacy of ignorance and misinformation about how the empire was created and sustained by invasion, looting of land and labour, cruelty and killing, still persists today. The consequences of de-colonisation and the reasons for the arrival of migrants who had been taught that Britain was their 'Mother country,' remain a mystery to many misinformed Britons. But as Paul Beaumont recently noted "*Britain's identity narrative relies upon glorifying its former empire*". (3) As such, it can be no surprise that Beaumont finds that, "[b]y relying on narratives that glorify Britain's history, or at least fail to take responsibility for the horrors of British colonial rule, large swathes of the Britain's population still view its history through rose-tinted goggles" (*ibid*).

## **Public School Boys**

Nostalgia leads to hiatus. Britain seems unable to confront its social class hierarchies. Deference to "one's betters" might have overtly disappeared, but covertly still runs through the grain of British society, and the (mainly) boys educated in what are still known as public schools - actually expensive private establishments - dominate British political life. The social and political values of the upper classes in the 19th century came to influence mass education through these schools as the ideologies implicit in their curricula filtered into the developing state elementary and secondary schools of the 20th century. As Robert Verkaik explained very recently, "*Public schools have helped to write British history. They have been cheerleaders for colonialism and controlled the narratives of Empire*". (4)

Public school Head Teachers and staff were mainly committed imperialists and

the public school boy was defined as a warrior patriot. This was a role enthusiastically embraced by Fettes, the public school attended (1966-71) by Anthony Charles Lynton Blair who led the country into seven wars as Prime Minister. The school magazine excelled in strident jingoism, confident that *'Britannia rules the waves.'* (5) The notions of military patriotic duty gave rise to a host of organisations with these values and Empire Day persisted until 1958 when it became Commonwealth Day.

Most of the public schools had been set up originally to educate poor scholars: a tradition which rapidly disappeared. Many were funded by money from imperial looting and a slave trade. The importance of public-school influence increased from 2010 with a coalition, then a Conservative government. David Cameron, instigator of the EU referendum, had five Old Etonians (including himself) and a preponderance of public-school boys in his Cabinet. Theresa May's Cabinet had fewer old Etonians, but almost all her Ministers were educated at private schools, followed by Oxford University. May promised to face up to the inequalities of private schooling in a Green Paper in October 2016, but never got around to it, whilst Boris Johnson selected a Cabinet of 60.9 % privately schooled members, including 4 Old Etonians.

## **Schools for the others**

The values and curricula filtered down from public schools to the schools educating a middle class, with the elementary schools for the working classes expanding from the later 19th century. For the working classes there was a need for more justification for colonial wars and imperial expansion.

Justification for imperial conquests and domination over colonised people was reproduced on a large scale in Victorian and Edwardian school textbooks and juvenile literature, much of it persisting into the 1970s. English and religion became vehicles for imperial propaganda, although working class children, confined to a diet of basic literacy and numeracy and manual training, did not get the full benefit of this until 1945.

References to "natives" toiling for the Empire persisted even after India had gained independence. An Empire Youth Annual published in 1948 extolled an 'Enormously Exciting Venture' - a government scheme, funded by Unilever, to

grow groundnuts (peanuts) in East and West Africa to make margarine. The article described how '*native women*' threshed the plants and '*native Dockers*' carried the bags on their heads. It told its youthful readers, the grandparents of today's schoolchildren, that 'the scheme will raise the standard of life of the natives in these possessions and keep valuable money within the Empire'. (6) The scheme was a total failure.

## Literature for Youth

From the 1880s onwards an expansion of popular publishing and the creation of wider readerships coincided with the development of mass education, and wider imperial adventures. The classic imperial writer and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907, Rudyard Kipling, produced works that have been influential throughout many decades. He specialised in propaganda for empire, his poem "*The White Man's Burden*" composed in 1899, extolled sending forth those public-school young men to oversee the '*sullen people*' of empire. The less well-known "*Brown Man's Burden*" is quoted in the appendix. Kipling's poetry certainly continued to be popular in public schools. In January 2017 the then Eton-educated Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, on a visit to Myanmar attempted to recite the poem 'Mandalay' while visiting a sacred Buddhist shrine. An embarrassed British Ambassador managed to stop him before the line '*Bloomin idol made of mud. Wot they call the great God Bud*'.

One market, which continued to be popular well into the 20th century were the imperially minded magazines, comics and stories for boys. Much of the literature was replete with militarism and patriotism, in which violence became legitimised as the right of a superior race. Girls were not well catered for and had to make do with Enid Blyton stories, one of which introduced '*The Tricky Golliwog*'. Post-World War Two, the Germans were added to the demonology and xenophobia continued to be a characteristic of children's literature. Both public school boys and slum boys shared the same imperial values, in which violence, fighting, sexism and racism figured large.

## Education for ignorance

The second half of the 20th century was surely a time when education for ignorance about the realities of a decaying empire no longer available to provide

loot and labour overseas persisted. Clement Attlee was not unduly worried about immigration and passed the 1948 British Nationality Act, notionally giving all imperial subjects the right of entry to Britain. Some of his MPs and the subsequent Conservative and Labour governments were intensely worried, with Churchill suggesting the slogan *'Keep Britain White'* for the 1955 election. The fiasco over trying to keep control of the Suez Canal in 1956 signalled the end of much of Britain's military power and by the end of the 1960s, over 30 major countries had achieved independence. A number of bloody conflicts preceding independence, notably in Malaya, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Kenya which were all reported in the British press as 'ungrateful natives fighting our troops'. Young men conscripted between 1948-1962 - again often grand-parents and parents of today, fought these wars. Much of the documentation of colonial administration and its cruelties were deliberately destroyed. Not much of this knowledge and understanding has yet reached the British school curriculum, although it is increasingly now being taught in British universities.

We so easily forget just how ingrained the Empire is in our recent history and current thinking. Even Attlee, giving the Chichele lecture at Oxford in 1960, was still describing his excitement and youthful imperialism over the large portions of the world map coloured pink, "*we believed in our great imperial vision.*" (7) This vision was encouraged by politician Enoch Powell, whose tribalism and nationalism articulated a romantic view of Empire and promised '*a lyrical indeed sublime way forward for a bemused and resentful people conscious of having lost their place in history*'. (8) Powell's views of immigration and sovereignty have been endlessly recorded, as has his claim that '*a sense of being a persecuted minority is growing among ordinary English people*'. Less well recorded are the views of some of his followers, for example, the murderers of black student Stephen Lawrence in 1993.

In December 1994 a police recording made at the house of one of the five suspects showed the young men waving knives and evoking Powell in their anti-black rhetoric: "*D'ya remember that Enoch Powell. That geezer... he went to Africa... yeah he knew it was a slum, he knew it was a shit hole and he came back saying, they're uncivilised. Then they started coming over here and he was saying I don't want fucking niggers here, they ruin the gaff, and he was right, they have.*" (9)

# The consequences of ignorance

Into the 21st century, education policy has been dominated by testing from pre-school to post university and demands for accountability by schools and teachers in a competitive ethos. There have been no clear ideas as to how a traditional curriculum could develop into an education for a democratic multicultural society. Governments have used a rhetoric of inclusiveness to disguise increased social segregation, and to defend a national curriculum that has remained largely nationalistic. A plea for more teaching of empire and its consequences at a conference in Bristol in 2004 led one teacher to assert that *"there is a public awkwardness and embarrassment about our imperial past"*. After bombings in London in 2005 Michael Gove, a journalist about to be elected to Parliament, wrote a book in which he likened parts of the religion of Islam to fascist and communist ideologies, and when Education Secretary from 2010 reinstated a traditional subject-centred curriculum which *"should not become a vehicle for imposing passing political fads on our children."* (10) These fads included race, racism, multiculturalism, immigration and gender issues.

In 2013 an even more tightly controlled curriculum with content and assessment was published subject by subject. All schools were required to promote *'fundamental British values'*, namely: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect for different faiths. Research into how the curriculum and its British values actually affects the views and beliefs of young people suggests that, among young people who have recently studied the Gove curriculum, ignorance and xenophobic views prevail. The Director of the South Asian Centre at the London School of Economics noted in 2016 that *'Students arrive at university completely ignorant about the Empire, that vital part of history. They have no knowledge of Britain's role in the Middle East over the last century, they have no clue about the history of immigration. They don't understand why people of other ethnicities came to Britain, they have not learned about it in school'*.

The overt racism and xenophobia has always been there. It was diminishing at a glacial rate but was unleashed anew after the Brexit vote. It will continue to damage the countries of Britain, especially England, unless future governments work towards a democratic and inclusive stance. No amount of teaching questionable British values will prevent scepticism as to whose values are being

promoted. As long as ignorance of the past and the presentation of a mythological future by self-interested politicians prevails then Britain has no hope of being a great Britain, or even a mediocre one.

How the UK went from Empire to Brexit still amazes other countries. One report from the rest of the world concluded: *"From a bad joke to a banana republic: (that's) how other countries see Britain"*. It is seen as a state determined to commit suicide, but which can't decide how to do it, led by a ship of fools unwilling to compromise, to great amusement from former colonies used to a better organised brutal and coordinated master. (11) Even a Russian TV host claimed that *"Everything that is happening testifies to the irresponsibility of the British elite. Their inability to correlate Britain's capabilities with its reality."* Imperial nostalgia, the great public schools, and our collective national embarrassment to deal with the elephant in our history have a lot to answer for.

## References

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## **Appendix**

*The Brown Man's Burden*

*Pile on the brown man's burden*

*To gratify your greed*

*Go clear away the 'niggas'*

*Whose progress would impede*

*Be very stern- for truly*

*Tis useless to be mild*

*With new-caught sullen people*

*Half devil and half child*

(Henry Labouchere 1899. Full text in Shashi Tharoor *Inglorious Empire: What the British did to India* 2006, Penguin )