

THE OXFORD HISTORY  
OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

# THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



EDITED BY

JUDITH M. BROWN AND WM. ROGER LOUIS



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THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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Volume IV. *The Twentieth Century*

EDITED BY Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis

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THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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VOLUME IV

*The Twentieth  
Century*



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Thake was appointed an official RAAF war artist in 1944. His water-colour gouaches depicted the strange,  
surreal patterns found in wrecked aircraft, bombed buildings, and war machinery.

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## FOREWORD

From the founding of the colonies in North America and the West Indies in the seventeenth century to the reversion of Hong Kong to China at the end of the twentieth, British imperialism was a catalyst for far-reaching change. British domination of indigenous peoples in North America, Asia, and Africa can now be seen more clearly as part of the larger and dynamic interaction of European and non-Western societies. Though the subject remains ideologically charged, the passions aroused by British imperialism have so lessened that we are now better placed than ever before to see the course of the Empire steadily and to see it whole. At this distance in time the Empire's legacy from earlier centuries can be assessed, in ethics and economics as well as politics, with greater discrimination. At the close of the twentieth century, the interpretation of the dissolution of the Empire can benefit from evolving perspectives on, for example, the end of the cold war. In still larger sweep, the *Oxford History of the British Empire* as a comprehensive study helps to understand the end of the Empire in relation to its beginning, the meaning of British imperialism for the ruled as well as the rulers, and the significance of the British Empire as a theme in world history.

It is nearly half a century since the last volume in the large-scale *Cambridge History of the British Empire* was completed. In the meantime the British Empire has been dismantled and only fragments such as Gibraltar and the Falklands, Bermuda and Pitcairn, remain of an Empire that once stretched over a quarter of the earth's surface. The general understanding of the British imperial experience has been substantially widened in recent decades by the work of historians of Asia and Africa as well as Britain. Earlier histories, though by no means all, tended to trace the Empire's evolution and to concentrate on how it was governed. To many late-Victorian historians the story of the Empire meant the rise of worldwide dominion and Imperial rule, above all in India. Historians in the first half of the twentieth century tended to emphasize constitutional developments and the culmination of the Empire in the free association of the Commonwealth. The *Oxford History of the British Empire* takes a wider approach. It does not depict the history of the Empire as one of purposeful progress through four hundred years, nor does it concentrate narrowly on metropolitan authority and rule. It does attempt to explain how varying conditions in Britain interacted with those in many other parts of the world to create both a constantly changing territorial Empire and ever-shifting patterns of social and economic relations. The *Oxford History of the British Empire* thus deals with the impact of



British imperialism on dependent peoples in a broader sense than was usually attempted in earlier historical writings while it also takes into account the significance of the Empire for the Irish, the Scots, and the Welsh as well as the English.

Volume IV, *The Twentieth Century*, relates the history of Britain's Empire in the era of unprecedented violence of the two world wars and the two tumultuous decades after 1945 that marked the rising ascendancy of Asian and African nationalism. In contrast to conventional historical interpretation, the volume does not present the view that the Empire underwent a steady decline and fall on the model of Gibbon's Roman Empire. On the contrary, the British Empire experienced a renewal of the colonial mission after both world wars, ultimately transforming itself into a Commonwealth of freely associated states. In the twentieth century the Empire thus revived and adjusted to changing circumstances of nationalist challenge and economic crisis.

There are certain themes that *The Twentieth Century* shares with previous volumes. One of these is the response of the British government to criticism of the Empire. The Colonial Office at mid-century found itself forced on the defensive against anti-colonial sentiment in the United States and in the United Nations. International condemnation of the Empire, however, merely added a dimension of dissent to a long British tradition. In the attack against imperialism, British radicals and other critics did not, on the whole, want to liquidate the Empire but to reform it and make it more accountable. As in the nineteenth century, the debates on the Empire in Parliament and in the press demonstrated a sense of ethical responsibility that remains, in retrospect, one of the principal characteristics of the British colonial era.

'Informal empire' is a theme common to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century volumes that raises a controversial question: to what extent was there an empire of trade and commerce which carried with it degrees of indirect political control in such places as China and Latin America? The idea of informal empire involves historical judgement and argument. It is revisionist in the sense that it is an issue of interpretation which changes in nuance and focus from one generation of historians to the next. The essential questions however remain the same. Should a country such as Iran, or for that matter other Middle Eastern states, be included in an analysis of the British imperial system because of the exploitation of oil resources and gradations of British political control? Does 'informal empire' help in understanding the complexity of the Empire as a world system? In this volume as in the nineteenth-century volume, authors accept or qualify the concept of informal empire in varying degrees, but in any event it enriches understanding of the formal empire.

A general economic theme connects with those of the preceding volumes. The aim of those who shaped the Empire's destinies in the twentieth century was the same as their Victorian predecessors. Despite the rationale that the British had a responsibility to protect the indigenous inhabitants and to develop the colonies for the benefit of the world's economy, colonies were expected to be self-sufficient. The goal was not that the British should sustain the Empire but that the Empire should continue to sustain Britain. The First World War revived the notion popular at the turn of the century that the Empire might fuel the British economy by the exploitation of tropical dependencies. This hope waned, but after 1929 and again after 1945, in circumstances of depression and war, the future of Britain as well as the Empire seemed to lie in colonial development, which would buoy up the British economy within the closed economic system known as the sterling area. Faith in the Empire as a source of British economic strength began to weaken only in the late 1950s. The dismantling of the sterling area marched hand in hand with decolonization.

The volume possesses a specific British cultural and social theme in common with others in the series. The Empire provided the opportunity to pursue a better life and to advance one's career: in the army and civil service, in business and industry, in agriculture and mining, in missionary work and education, in banking and shipping, and in such professions as medicine, law, and engineering. The Irish and Scots as well as the English took advantage of the Empire, but, in proportion to the population of the United Kingdom, the Scots seized the initiative to a remarkable degree. Migration moved in many directions: from Britain to all corners of the world, but also within the dependent Empire and the Dominions, and, towards the latter part of the century, increasingly from the colonies to Britain. Migration to Britain and the opportunities there for employment, business, and education brought about an historic change. As a result of the Empire, Britain became an evermore complex, multicultural, multi-religious, post-colonial society.

A special feature of the series is the Select Bibliography of key works at the end of each chapter. These are not intended to be a comprehensive bibliographical or historiographical guide (which will be found in Volume V) but rather they list useful and informative works on the themes of each chapter.

The Editor-in-Chief and Editors acknowledge, with immense gratitude, support from the Rhodes Trust, the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, DC, St Antony's College, Oxford, and the University of Texas at Austin. We have received further specific support from Lord Dahrendorf, former Warden of St Antony's College, Oxford; Sheldon Ekland-Olson, formerly Dean of Liberal

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Wm. Roger Louis

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## PREFACE

Volume IV of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* not only relates the history of the Empire in the twentieth century in a British context but also assesses the significance of colonial rule for peoples under British sway. The rise of nationalism and the coming of colonial independence are two of the volume's principal concerns.

The themes of the Empire's economy, the White Dominions in relation to migration and security, India's special position in the Empire, and the administration of the colonies, all build on the foundation of Volume III, *The Nineteenth Century*. As in the previous volumes, some chapters in *The Twentieth Century* choose an earlier point of departure than might be suggested by the sharp hundred-year breaks. The twentieth-century Empire cannot be understood without taking into account the expansion of the Empire into Africa and the Pacific in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the consolidation of colonial rule in the decades before the First World War. Some chapters commence by examining the Victorian legacy. Others respect the view that the reach of the nineteenth century extended to 1914. There is a similar ambiguity on the point of termination. The Empire came to an end mainly in the 1960s in the era of African independence. Yet certain important but quite different issues remained unresolved until the closing decades of the century: the conclusion of the Rhodesian crisis with Zimbabwean independence in 1980, the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1991, and the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997. The volume thus explicitly embraces different views on the periodization of the Empire's history in the twentieth century.

At the turn of the century few anticipated the rapid changes in the Empire and fewer still its dissolution. By 1910 Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa had all become self-governing Dominions, but the issue of self-rule in Ireland, and later in India, divided the British public. Ireland was a member of the Commonwealth from 1922 until 1949; but as late as 1947 it was still uncertain whether an independent India would remain associated with Britain by joining the Commonwealth. India's decision not to break away is fundamental to the volume as a whole. India set the precedent for other non-European nations to join the Commonwealth, thus enabling over fifty states to be Commonwealth members at the end of the twentieth century. This long-range development has affected the way the history of the Empire and Commonwealth has been often written. India's decision strengthened the Whiggish view of the Empire's progress and purpose

including the belief that British rule had been designed originally to allow dependent peoples to advance towards self-government and to reach fulfilment in the Commonwealth. Some of the chapters in this volume challenge that assumption. The Commonwealth, according to this counter interpretation, was not intended to end the Empire but to continue it by other means.

At least until the Second World War, the prevailing assumption among those involved in the affairs of the Empire was the long-term nature of British rule. The Empire might or might not last for a thousand years, in Churchill's phrase, but few, nationalists and British alike, dreamed that it would come clattering down so quickly. In analysing the reasons for the rapid dissolution of the Empire, and its aftermath, the book makes clear that the Empire was the casualty of war, of shifts in international opinion and the world economy, and of the rising tide of Asian, African, and Caribbean nationalism. The consequences of the Empire's dissolution, and the legacy of British rule, remain perhaps the most controversial issues in the volume. Can the lasting impact of British rule ultimately be judged as beneficial or harmful? The book as a whole adopts a pluralistic approach, implicitly at least, in answering that question and, as different chapters face the issue in different ways, they reflect the uneven and complex nature of the colonial experience itself.

The book is divided into thematic chapters that deal with Britain and the Empire throughout the world, and regional chapters on specific areas and countries. A preliminary chapter places the Empire in the spirit of the times of the Edwardian era. The chapter on the Dominions focuses on the critical question of Dominion loyalty and the place of the Dominions within the British Imperial system. Individual chapters are devoted to Canada and South Africa, with a chapter covering Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific islands coming late in the volume because the independence of the Pacific islands took place mainly from the 1970s. The chapter on Ireland is placed fairly early to connect with themes in the previous volume and to demonstrate the continuing centrality of Ireland in the Empire into the twentieth century. Two chapters deal with the economic structure of the Empire, one on the British economy and the sterling area, the other on regional economies, with the latter chapter covering the post-colonial as well as the colonial era.

Chronologically the book reaches its half-way point with the Second World War. The second half of the book, though concerned mainly with regions such as South-East Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific contains certain thematic chapters including one on the Empire and Islam and another on gender. The chapters on the whole, however, focus mainly on the impact of British imperialism on specific countries such as India. The chapters in this latter part of the book give

point to the overall unifying theme of nationalism and independence. The concept of 'informal empire' is especially evident in the chapters on the Middle East, Latin America, and China. One chapter deals with the Commonwealth legacy. An epilogue draws together the main themes of the volume by reflecting on the meaning of the history of the British Empire at the close of the twentieth century.

W.R.L.

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The following abbreviations are used for records at the Public Record Office,  
London:

ADM	Admiralty
CAB	Cabinet Office
CO	Colonial Office
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office
DO	Dominions Office
FO	Foreign Office
PREM	Prime Minister's Office
T	Treasury

All other abbreviations and manuscript sources will be found in the first reference  
in each chapter.

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