

ANOTHER BUMPER FUN BOOK FROM NIALL FERGUSON

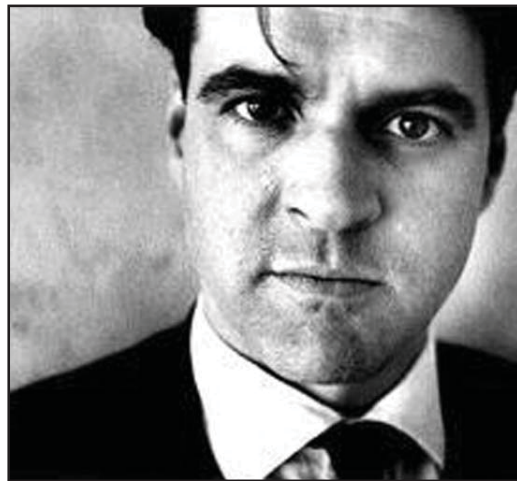
A Review by Angus Calder

I arrived in Nairobi in 1968 to take up my first university teaching job. There was still an aura of excitement around the word 'uhuru' – freedom – granted to Kenya by the Brits four years before. There was much talk of 'nation-building'. Young idealists, some very gifted, believed they could create a new 'national literature', though ironically most expected to do this in the language of the ex-colonial power, English. By the time I left in 1971, ripe dreams were rotting. Despite a continuing apparatus of 'parliamentary democracy', President Kenyatta and his clique ruled dictatorially. An elite dominated by one section of the large Kikuyu ethnic group had conscripted and corrupted enough allies from other 'tribes' to ensure a stability which even now impresses gullible or venal foreigners. But 'literature' withered when it had barely bloomed. (Though, as I write, I've received copies of just-published books by poets, now veterans, whom I knew in those 'Great Days', as the Kenyan press came to dub them. All was not lost.) The ruling clique, while enriching itself by collaboration with multinationals and syphoning Western aid into its Swiss bank accounts, assassinated or, less extremely, jailed opponents in politics and the press. Not until after the Fall of the Wall in 1989 did the US Ambassador begin to speak against human rights abuses in his nation's reliably anti-communist ally.

Yet Kenya, for all its abundant stinking poverty, can still be seen as one of post-colonial Africa's 'successes'. Malawi certainly can not. President Kamuzo Banda, from 1964, after eliminating by murder or imprisonment, able men who might oppose him, zealously maintained certain colonial institutions, such as the teaching of Latin at his favourite elite boarding school. Also, the emergency laws which had enabled the country's colonial masters to do what it liked with opponents such as he himself had once been. But since he was soundly anti-communist, the West accepted Banda although his regime 'fed protesters to the crocodiles'. Just now we see the appalling Robert Mugabe likewise controlling and abusing a simulacrum of British-style 'justice'... Malawi is desperately poor and Zimbabwe, once relatively prosperous, and in possession of a fiercely free press, is being driven down to that level by Mugabe, his cronies and his thugs. The legacy of Empire in Africa is largely hideous.

Niall Ferguson greatly admires the First Anglophone Empire, the intellect and disinterestedness of its Indian Civil Service, the devotion of its officers in Black Africa. In his latest book, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (Allen Lane), he argues that the Second Anglophone Empire should do likewise – assume formal possession, backed by military force, sustained on the ground by self-sacrificing experts prepared to reside for years, even lifetimes, in the

steamy or arid places with nasty insect life where their Platonic guidance is needful. Well, the colonial service in the Sudan, nominally working on behalf of an 'Anglo-Egyptian Condominium' and thus a bit different, also regarded itself as an elite corps, more than a bit superior to the oicks from minor public schools who ran countries such as the Gambia, where poverty so sickened President Roosevelt when he touched down there briefly during the war, strengthening his 'anti-imperialist' convictions ... It struck him as a 'hell-hole' – 'the most horrible thing I have ever seen in my life'. Colonialism seemed to him synonymous with 'Dirt. Disease. [And a] very high mortality rate.' Since 'independence', Sudan has become one of the world's most atrocious 'hell-holes'.



That Ghana, despite a troubled political history, has not, can be put down to the existence of native political elites, before, during and after independence, strong and sagacious enough to deal with colonialism to their own advantage. That black Africans with such names as Casely-Hayford, Gardiner, Rawlings, Awoonor-Williams, Laing and Brew have been prominent in Ghana's political and cultural history shows that intermarriage and deliberate self-assimilation, over centuries, have been part of that relative success. But the great success stories of Empire, in economic terms, were Singapore and Hong Kong. Here Platonist guff about governing in the ultimate interests of 'underdeveloped' dusky or yellow subjects, and Burkeian notions of 'trusteeship', never applied. The Brits were very explicitly there to trade. Oddly enough, one belief which I can share with Niall Ferguson is his belief that Free Trade is intrinsically a good thing. But what I have seen in Kenya (confirmed by return visits in 1975 and 1991) is the stifling of civil freedom and



honest business by multinationals in cahoots with corrupt local capitalists. This is largely what 'globalisation', another concept of which Ferguson mightily approves, has entailed. If some alchemy could transform Malawi and Harare into thriving entrepôts, that might actually work, as occupation by US troops certainly would not.

Like Ferguson's book *Empire, on the First Anglophone Thingie*, which I wrote about in *The Drouth* last year, this new one has been tied in with a TV series. But whereas *Empire* was flashy and unsound, *Colossus* is mostly based on secure scholarship. Initially, it is wholly sensible and uncontentious. The USA is an 'imperialist' country in 'denial'. In 1978, V.G Kiernan, in a book not noticed in Ferguson's extensive bibliography, *America: The New Imperialism*, made out a cogent case from his subtle Marxist position that US 'world hegemony' amounted to 'empire'. It is easy for Ferguson to multiply quotations from Founding Fathers of the Republic and their contemporaries which show that Empire was in their minds from the outset, which is the reason why I subtitled my own book *Revolutionary Empire* (1981), taking the story of British expansion down to the mid 1780s, *The Rise of the English-Speaking Empires*. George Washington himself called the new USA 'a nascent empire' and Jefferson in his 1801 inaugural talked about 'extending extensive empire'. Here Ferguson misses a trick.

It is always worth consulting OED when discussing the meaning of words. The medieval definition of Empire involved power plus 'extent'. Any extensive monarchical domain was an 'empire', so Henry VIII was not incorrect in the 1530s, as Ferguson asserts, to refer to 'English Empire'. Indeed, as late as the mid-nineteenth century, a description of the 'British Empire' was published which was mainly devoted to these islands. The word 'imperialism' entered the language in 1858. It then referred to the arrogant, expansionist talk and behaviour of the Emperor Napoleon III, which seemed around that time to threaten Britain with invasion. Yet within a quarter of a century, some people in Britain were using it positively. While those who did so saw Britain's imperial expansion as a beneficent force for other peoples, in the next century, the analyses of J.A. Hobson and his disciple Lenin (as Ferguson does note) turned it into a boo-word again, with a different boo-sense. Imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism, ruthlessly mercenary in its nature, as displayed, eg, in the actions in Africa of Cecil Rhodes and King Leopold of Belgium.

When the first US republicans referred to their 'expanding empire', they were thinking primarily of extent. It seemed inevitable that the original 13 states would expand westward to the Pacific, a process made possible by purchases of territory between 1803 and 1853 from France, Spain, Britain and Mexico. US settlers would support themselves by farming, ranching, hunting for furs and mining, not as servants of big business but as men of independent mind. The outrageous rise of big business after the Civil War meant that conditions in Western mines would recall the worst of black slavery, and it is significant that this

coincided with the embrace of the term 'imperialism' not only by relatively nice guys in Britain, but by fancy crooks like Rhodes. (On the other hand, Andrew Carnegie, monster big-businessman, vehemently opposed, alongside Mark Twain, the US takeover of the Philippines.) The previous use of Empire as a term harks back to Roman *imperium* (which more than incidentally conceded citizenship to members of all ethnic groups, as the USA did, at least after 1865), not forward to Leopold's Congo, though we can see, as Kiernan and others did long before Ferguson, elements of 'nasty' imperialism in US expropriation of native Americans.

The acquisition of Alaska from Russia in 1867 was for a long time almost an irrelevance. However, that of the Philippines from Spain in 1898 did pitch the USA into the domination of lands in far continents long characteristic of European empires. This, of course, was when Kipling invited his transatlantic cousins to 'take up the white man's burden'. But whereas the Brits and Dutch stuck it out in India and Indonesia for centuries, the USA had no stomach for ruling folk who did not welcome its presence, and pulled out after less than five decades. Likewise, in Haiti, where political chaos positively incited US intervention in a significant slice of land near home, occupation lasted only from 1915 to 1934. (Had the US at that time excised the cancer of racism from its head, as it has now, this is one case where Ferguson's wish for direct colonial rule is tempting to consider. But now the US is so widely and vehemently accused of *nasty* 'imperialism' that Americans could not wear formal possession of Haiti, let alone the rest of the world.)



Interventions and withdrawals left the US with a curious collection of overseas properties, generally suitable as bases for a big navy to challenge Britain's. Hawaii (occupied 1893) would eventually become a state of the Union. Puerto Rico (1898) would be denied that honour, but half-assimilated as a 'Commonwealth united with the US'. To Guam (1898), American Samoa (1899), Virgin Islands (purchased from Denmark, 1916), ranked as 'possessions', would be added, in freer association, various Pacific islands



after World War II. All these together would be less significant than US military bases in scores of countries all over the world. One could argue that American support for puppet dictators in Latin America (Somoza, Batista, Pinochet) has amounted to much the same as British 'indirect rule' through native potentates in parts of Africa and Asia, but again 'stickability' has been significantly less. Despite having a base on the soil of Cuba 'legitimately' leased after US military action had 'freed' the island from Spain in 1898, American governments have not toppled, over nearly half a century, the obnoxious (to them) Fidel Castro. The attempt to bolster a puppet regime in Vietnam ended in humiliation and failure. Now even Dubya wants to pull out of rule, direct or indirect, in Iraq ASAP, or his wickedly illegal invasion will look as if it has produced 'another Vietnam'. Bush Jr is vehement in his denials that the USA is imperialist. It just wants to create the conditions for democracy and leave other people to get on with it. Americans in general remain doggedly wedded to the idea that their nation never has been and is not now 'imperialist'.

Though only 0.5 percent of a military enrolment of nearly nine million were killed in action in Vietnam (interestingly, a recent estimate for Iraq goes as high as one percent) the dismal eventualities in South East Asia created America's 'body bag complex', but did not prevent an addiction to the hideously erroneous view (see Stephen Budiansky's recent, brilliant, caustic study of *Air Power* – Viking, 2003) that missiles and bombs can win wars and get rid of evil totalitarians and terrorists. For the record, to the dismay of various friends and allies, I supported the aims of Western action in Kosovo/Serbia and Afghanistan. What Milosevic and the Taliban were up to was intolerable. But US obsession with bombing was insupportable. Every military historian and analyst knows that you can only achieve decisive results when ground forces march and drive in (though as Iraq is currently proving, even that will not give success to an illegitimate, contested occupation). However, ground invasion entails body bags. The British gutter press, extolling as *heroes* 'our boys in Iraq' when they die in accidents or by friendly fire, seems to go along with the bizarre American notion that people who join up to wield lethal weapons in armed forces are to be grieved to the summits when they are killed. It is actually much more dangerous to be a window cleaner or deep sea fisherman in this country than to serve in the British Army.

When Ferguson by subtitle argues that US Empire having 'risen' is now 'falling', it seems to me that he is inviting our consideration of three propositions. One is that the USA, despite its position as by far the greatest economic and military power in a 'unipolar' world, lacks stomach to take up, as it were, the Anglophone Burden. Americans not only shrink from military losses, they are reluctant to live abroad. There are a lot of good quips in his lively book, but I think that Ferguson is straightfaced, amazingly, when he suggests that African-Americans, being less tied to the material prosperity of the US homeland, might make the best proconsuls if actual colonisation of far countries were enacted. Wait for it – 'It is of course

just possible that the African-Americans will turn out to be the Celts of the American empire, driven to overseas adventure by comparatively poor opportunities at home, as the Irish and Scots were in the nineteenth century.'

Secondly, it is arguable that the growth of the European Union may provide a counterbalance to US power. Ferguson swithers on this one. The free-trade globaliser in him is deeply repelled by EU policies which give rights to workers and trades unions, and he argues with some pertinence that the various states included in the EU have deeply different mindsets. On the other hand he needs must concede that in population and economic strength, Europe can match the US.

Thirdly, Ferguson is aware of the revival of China, with a population of 1.3 billion, a huge army and an economy which has been growing for two decades at a rate of between eight and 12 percent per year. This bears on the matter of colossal US deficits, actual and prospective. America is the world's biggest debtor, and its main creditors are the thrifty Chinese. Sooner or later, spendthrift policies like those pursued by Bush may well bring self-destruction. I think the implications of Chinese resurgence go further than he concedes. That bounding-forward economy makes demands on world resources, notably oil, which raise serious dangers of lethal friction. With so many well-educated people and traditions of trading and even ruling beyond its borders, China could create an Empire more to Ferguson's satisfaction than the USA's. I hope I do not live to see the wars between China and India, maybe China and Russia, perhaps even China and Japan, China and America, which might dominate the destiny of humankind.

In sum: Ferguson writes well, and early chapters of *Colossus* outline the history of US imperialism with learning, wit and humanity. Then, it seems to me, he goes barmy. Apart from his absurd nostalgia for the British Raj, he substitutes for long-term speculation about the next 50 years page after page of detailed economic analysis of how things stand just now. One can get that from next week's *Economist*. From well-poised historical analysis and narrative, Ferguson descends into provocative and unconvincing journalism. At best, this book could be seen as equivalent to best-selling Penguin Specials of the late 30s: argumentative, well-informed, but destined to obsolescence as the world staggered into war.

