



THE LANCASTER HISTORY LECTURE 2024

'How British Imperialism Has Shaped the Globe'

by

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by Sathnam Sanghera

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THANKYOU FOR INVITING ME TO LANCASTER TODAY to talk about the legacies of the British empire.

I've been talking and writing about British imperialism for about half a decade now... and if there's one thing I've learned, it is this: people disagree about it, quite intensely.

Seriously, if you're in the mood for a fight, talk about the British empire.

There's very little about the biggest empire in human history that is not contentious.

People argue about what drove its expansion... to make money, to spread British values, or just because parts of the world were just there, available, to conquer?

People argue about when it ended. In the independence of India on 15 August 1947 or in the handing back of Hong Kong on 1 July 1997? Or maybe it never ended?

People argue about when it reached its peak and how large it really got.

Some people have questioned whether the British empire ever happened. At all!

Among these people is my former hometown MP Enoch Powell. In a twist that makes Lawrence Fox's journey from D-list actor to far right activist feel unremarkable, this imperialist whose life was shaped by the colonial mission, started to claim from the 1960s onwards that British empire had been 'a myth', 'a deception' and an 'invention, all along'.

He said that people had ever believed in the British empire was 'one of the most extraordinary paradoxes in political history'. He also insisted that 'England underwent no organic change as the mistress of a world empire'.

It was a peculiar thing to say. For a man whose mission in life, whose main ambition, was to be Viceroy of India.

For a man who in 1947 tried to persuade Winston Churchill to impose martial law in India.

But then this view is arguably just an extension of remarks famously uttered by Sir John Seeley, the founding father of British imperial history. He asserted in *The Expansion of England* that 'the British empire was acquired in a fit of absence of mind', arguing, as many have since, that empire was a bunch of accidents, errors and unintentional consequences, and responses to accidents, errors and unintentional consequences.

If you believe this, it's not much to go a bit further and say that empire never happened.

For what it's worth, and this may not come as a surprise as I've written three books now on the subject, and I'm here to talk to you about it... but I think the British empire did happen.

It happened. Let's get that out of the way, eh.

It shaped the world and Britain in all sorts of profound and un-profound ways, and there's no shortage of evidence I can point to, from just standing here.

In my cup here, for example, I've got some Yorkshire tea... which I realise might not be a popular choice in Lancashire. What do you guys drink? There's a gap in the market for Lancashire tea, perhaps.

But guess what, the tea in these teabags does not come from Yorkshire.

As the Yorkshire Tea website explains, the tea in these teabags is a blend of tea that comes from up to twenty different parts of Africa and India

– many of them former British imperial territories. It was British imperialist who not only made tea a national drink in Britain, but in India too.

Of course, given the time of day, I could have got away with drinking something harder, from the bar.... Where there are further imperial legacies, not least in the quinine present in tonic water... Quinine being the chemical which allowed imperialists to survive the worst effects of malaria and to colonise parts of Africa and Asia.

Then there is rum. Molasses, the residue left over after sugar has crystallised from sugar-cane juice, enabled the creation of the famous alcoholic spirit, on Barbados, where the British industrialised the production of sugar using the enslaved. Rum was the product of Continental European, British, African, and Amerindian influence, all present on the island.

Looking at where this university is located, there is another imperial legacy in the national parks we are surrounded by in this beautiful part of the world.

Imperial Brits sometimes saw themselves as environmental stewards defending the natural world. Organisations such as the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire (a British charity that exists today, campaigning in the twenty-first century as Fauna & Flora International) convened international conferences, created game reserves in British colonies.

Often the imperialists had created the environment and animal destruction in the first place, and often they blamed indigenous people for the damage, but nevertheless, they set up environmental charities and they set up national parks, from New Zealand to Africa.

Plans for parks in East Africa had been formulated in the 1930s and, having been put on hold during the war, were completed immediately after it. These imperial parks paved the way for similar initiatives back home, with

the 1949 National Parks Act providing for the opening up of conservation areas in Britain.

There are further imperial legacies to be found in the curriculum at Lancaster University.

The field of Geography famously relied on European imperialism to develop as a subject. It was established earlier than history, as an academic subject. The ties between anthropology and empire are deep. The intense study of English literature has a longer academic history in India than in Britain...

And then you have the racial diversity of this room, of course. One of the main reasons Britain is such a multicultural society is that British empire was highly multicultural.

It gets forgotten but the passengers on the Windrush arrived as British citizens. The 1948 Nationality Act, enacted what had been true for decades, that anyone born in the empire had the rights of a British citizen.

As the famous line goes: we are here because you were there.

This is a huge legacy. But actually, when it comes to the global legacies of the British empire, it's still pretty small fry.

Yes, millions of people of colour now live in Britain because of the British empire but the British empire also enslaved 3 million Africans and sent them to work in plantations across the Atlantic.

In Ireland, an estimated 1 million people died during the famine in Ireland under British rule in the late 1840s, and many more were uprooted and resettled abroad.

Three historians, working together, have estimated that in total the British were responsible for the deaths of over a million people between 1838 and 1818, during the First Afghan War, the First Opium War, the Indian

Uprising, the Second Opium War, the Second Afghan War and the 1878–80 wars in South Africa.

Some 15 million people were displaced as a consequence of the Partition of India, and up to 2 million people died.

Recent research has revealed that over 140 years in Australia there were at least 270 organised massacres of First Nations people as a consequence of which the First Nations community was decimated, falling from around 1–1.5 million to less than 100,000 by the start of the twentieth century.

There was the wiping out of the indigenous people of the Caribbean, the indigenous people of Tasmania.

The British sent 1 million Indians to plantations around the world, in Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, to replace the enslaved after Abolition. It's one of the reasons for the massive Indian diaspora. One of the reasons why you see Indians wherever you go in the world.

And there are more legacies, beyond this human geography.

The influence of the British empire can be felt in the daily lives of people across the planet.

It explains the spread of the English language. Patterns of global tax avoidance. Christianity in West Africa.

The existence of entire nations: Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Pakistan.

The creation of entire cities like Nairobi and colonial Bombay.

The establishment of tropical Medicine. The global system of time.

Ganga! Introduced by Indian indentured labourers sent by the British to replace the enslaved in Jamaica, and now seen as intrinsic to Jamaican culture. The birth of international law.

The British empire can also be felt every day in our news agenda.

The situation in Israel-Palestine is one we helped to create when in charge of the region after the First World War.

There's an international dispute currently raging about the borders of Guyana, drawn during empire... and now threatens to turn into war with Venezuela.

There was a recent referendum in Australia to give the indigenous better representation, which generated huge controversy and upset, when Australia voted NO.

There are serious calls for reparations among Caribbean nations.

Frankly, you need to understand the history of British empire to understand the modern world. You need to understand British empire to understand your daily life.

But I know some of you will have a specific question in your mind as I talk about the legacies of the biggest empire in human history. And the specific question will be this: are the legacies of the British empire, overall, good or bad?

I know some of you are thinking this because this has always been the way Britain has thought about the empire.

People in Britain were debating whether empire was good or bad, as it was happening.

In more recent decades, there have been books like those by Niall Ferguson, arguing that overall, the legacies of British empire were good. Or books by Kwasi Kwarteng or Shashi Tharoor arguing that, overall, the legacies were bad.

Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn announced in the run- up to the last general election that under his party children would be taught about the 'historical injustice' of British colonialism as part of the national curriculum.

In contrast, Michael Gove announced early in his tenure as Secretary of State for Education that history lessons in schools needed to 'celebrate' the legacy of the British empire.

This black and white way of viewing complex history has got us nowhere and gets us nowhere. It's like saying you want to study the climate of the last 300 years but only focus on the sunshine or the rain.

It gets even more strange when this basic way of viewing complex history turns into a balance sheet. Where the 'good' is balanced against the 'bad', with the aim of coming to an overall conclusion about the greatness or evil of the empire

It leads to bizarre logic and absurd argument.

Tell me, how many miles of Indian railway built by the British make up for the up to 2 million deaths during partition?

How many 'free' votes cast in Nigerian elections since independence make up for the hundreds of thousands of deaths that have come about as a result of the civil war caused by Britain amalgamating the country in such a crude way.

At which precise point did the capitalist prosperity introduced by imperial capitalists to North America begin to balance out the deaths of millions of indigenous people through disease and settler violence?

How many animals saved in the national parks set up in Africa by British imperialists make up for the damage caused by the prickly-pear invasion of Australia?

This view of British imperial history, where our national history is forever being given an overall rating, as if complex history were a phone-case purchase being rated on Amazon, where apples are forever being balanced against pears, where human lives somehow get balanced against claims of technological development, feels more absurd than ever.

And it also makes little sense when the legacies are so contradictory...

The British empire resulted in the establishing of democracy in all sorts of places, but also geopolitical chaos elsewhere...

The British empire sometimes spread the rule of law, but also institutionalised legal inequality in a way which means that millions of people still can't bank on justice today.

The British empire was a propagator of racism, but also fostered racial cooperation, witnessed a spread of anti-racism in reaction to it and sometimes took on settlers, in places like Australia, for their extreme racism.

The British empire both destroyed and saved large swathes of the global environment, spread the free press and press censorship, saw the mass destruction and construction of buildings, both combated and propagated hunger, encouraged both education and wilful ignorance.

I know some of you will struggle with the idea that opposite things can be true at the same time. I did once.

You might, for example, say that abolition does not make up for slavery. It's something that I would have said when I wrote my first book on empire. After all, the British transported more than three million Africans across the Atlantic and then, on abolition, liberated only 800,000 people.

But this is an argument that could be countered on the grounds that, by passing the 1833 Emancipation Act, Britain saved innumerable millions from being enslaved over subsequent centuries, so the number of 800,000 should be inflated by tens of millions.

It might also feel superficially logical to say that the animal- and nature preservation/conservation efforts that British imperialists eventually embarked upon did not make up for the destruction of animals and nature that they instigated in the first place.

But this could be countered on the grounds that, over subsequent centuries, the number of animals and the amount of nature imperialists conserved through, say, the building of national parks and reservations, far outweighs any damage they may have originally caused.

These kinds of arguments are both hypothetical in the extreme and far from illuminating.

We've got to give up on trying to balance things against other things, or we'll be driven mad by them.

Much better to simply accept slavery, anti-slavery, destruction/preservation of animals/ nature as discrete phenomena in their own right and attempt to understand their complicated stories. Much better to try, at every possible stage, to seek nuance than to come to some kind of generalised overall conclusion.

British empire was ultimately a mass of contradictions, and its legacies are contradictory too.

Opposite things can be true at the same time. This is an idea that liberate us, not only in our personal lives and our understanding of politics, but in our understanding of history.

My friend, and mentor, the imperial historian Professor Alan Lester, put it well when I discussed the balance with him recently.

He said: 'To me the empire is something that consists of trillions, infinite numbers of interactions between people, between groups... The same person in British empire might be impacted negatively by colonialism on one day and positively the next. They could find themselves humiliated in the street by a white man or woman one day, and the next day call on the colonial police to sort out a dispute. People could be imprisoned or elevated in status at different stages of their lives. People like Gandhi benefited from British educations and professional qualifications and supported the empire

at a certain stage of their lives and then came deeply to resent its racial exclusions at another and campaigned against it. So weighing up a balance sheet, even for just one individual, is impossible, let alone for millions of people over hundreds of years over 25 per cent of the world's surface. It's a fruitless exercise. It's better I think to just trace causative connections.'

I find the idea that you can identify contradictory legacies, without having to weigh them up even on a local level, liberating.

Though, obviously, there is complexity within this complexity: it only goes so far.

There are opposites within the opposites. There are certain facts about empire which are incontrovertibly uncomplex. When it comes to an institution like the royal family, for example, it's perfectly possible to observe that their involvement in slavery far outweighs their involvement in abolition.

But when it comes to generalising about British empire as a whole, whatever you say about the British empire, the opposite is almost always true to a certain degree. To how much of a degree? It's often unknowable. And accepting anything else will eventually tie you into intellectual knots.

I really do believe that anyone approaching this history with an open mind, will eventually come to accept the complex, contradictory nature of it all. The history resists simplistic explanations.

And there's no better example of what I mean than Jan Morris, who wrote a deeply nostalgic and hugely influential trilogy on the British empire, a history which influenced Boris Johnson and an entire generation of Etonians, only to remark, in an act of insight towards the end of her life that she was 'ashamed' of the work.

However, having said this, seeing British empire as an incredibly complex mass of contradictions doesn't prevent us from saying it's absurd to

maintain, as too many people do, that the achievements of abolition mean that our national involvement in slavery should not be explored.

Nor does it stop us observing that historians have for too long approached this history from the point of view of the colonisers and ignored the colonised.

It doesn't stop us from observing that imperialists made concerted efforts to repress evidence of what had happened.

It doesn't stop us from observing that there is now an organised, well-funded campaign to shut down discussion of slavery and empire in Britain.

It doesn't stop us from observing that anyone who attempts to talk about imperial history with real nuance is shouted down by culture warriors of various stripes keen on basic views of history.

And it doesn't stop us from observing that we need to pay more attention to what nations formerly in the empire are trying to tell us about how the British empire shaped their development.

It's time to abandon this monochromatic way of seeing our imperial history once and for all.

It's time to seek nuance wherever it's available.

It's time for everyone, even those of us who think we know a lot, to challenge what we thought we knew and to be open to changing our minds sometimes.

Thankyou.

Sathnam Sanghera was born to Punjabi immigrant parents in Wolverhampton in 1976. He entered the education system unable to speak English but went on to graduate from Christ's College, Cambridge with a first class degree in English Language and Literature. He has been shortlisted for the Costa Book Awards twice, for his memoir *The Boy With The Topknot* and his novel *Marriage Material*. *Empireland* has been longlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction, was named a Book of the Year at the National Book Awards of 2022, and inspired both the Channel 4 series *Empire State of Mind* and Sanghera's children's book about the British empire *Stolen History*. His latest book is *Empireworld: How British Imperialism Shaped the Globe* (2024). He lives in London.