

# Book Review: Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain by Sathnam Sanghera

*In Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain, Sathnam Sanghera offers a new critique of the history of the British Empire and its continuing impact on British society, drawing on secondary source material, personal experience and sharp enquiry. With an impressive bibliography, this candid and informed book is deserving of all the plaudits heaped on it, writes Ramnik Shah.*

***Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain. Sathnam Sanghera. Viking. 2021.***

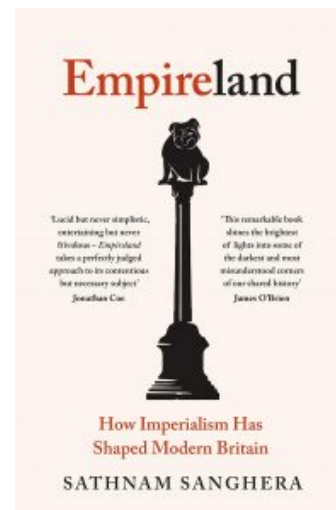
[Empireland](#) is a fresh critique of the British Empire (hereafter 'Empire') from Sathnam Sanghera's unique perspective as a UK-born child of Indian Sikh parents who migrated to Britain in the late 1960s. Sanghera is an accomplished journalist who has won many prizes for his writings in *The Times* and the *Financial Times*. He has also, among other things, twice been shortlisted for the Costa Book Awards, including for his memoir, [The Boy with the Topknot](#), which was [adapted for a BBC Drama production in 2017](#). Now his credentials as a public intellectual have received a further boost with this well-publicised study of Empire.

The publication of this book could not have been more timely, coinciding with Black Lives Matter and related movements which have brought into sharp focus the historical dynamics of Empire as well as its contemporary significance generally, and to Britain's BAME communities in particular.

Until these recent happenings, however, it was no exaggeration to say that on its metropolitan home front, the Empire had more or less been forgotten, with little left by way of folk memory. While it did not much figure in our national conversation, the legacies of Empire have nevertheless remained visible in material and human terms, although largely unacknowledged.

As Sanghera puts it in the first chapter, 'Despite a recent surge of interest in British colonial history [...] the effect of British empire upon this country is poorly understood' (1). He attributes this to the failure of the UK education system to teach successive generations of schoolchildren about the subject. He returns to this topic in his last chapter, 'Working Off the Past', in the context of the demands for 'decolonising' curriculums. He suggests that campaigners might have a better chance of succeeding if they talked about *widening* rather than *decolonising* curriculums, essentially by inclusion of black and ethnic minority history, culture and migration in the syllabus. In this reviewer's opinion, Sanghera's own book would make a valuable contribution in that regard!

The second chapter, 'Imperialism and Me' is, as its title implies, a candid account of the author's personal journey, both physical and metaphorical, of discovery and learning about Empire. Sanghera's immigrant trajectory and Sikh heritage come alive on his many visits to India – as a child, as an adult and as a documentary-maker. He ends this chapter poignantly: 'Having faced up to how Britain has shaped and defined my life in deep ways I had never realized, I can't help but wonder how imperialism may have shaped modern Britain itself' (29). This is the central theme of the book.





EMPIRE DAY IN JAMAICA, 24 MAY 1944 (K 7751) Picture taken during Empire Day celebrations in Kingston, Jamaica. Picture shows:- The Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) march past with junior commander Barbara Oakley in command. Copyright: © IWM. Original Source: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205189706>

In the third chapter, 'Difficult History', Sanghera advances five propositions as a guide to the fundamentals of Empire, with quotations from some of the numerous books listed in his extensive bibliography. Under the proposition that 'Britain's relationship with its colonies varied across the globe and over time', for example, he discusses the early stages of Empire: 'The first British empire, which ran from the seventeenth century to the 1780s, was founded on the development of sugar plantations in the West Indies and involved large numbers of settlers to the American colonies and the Caribbean. The second British empire was a more concerted power grab of India and Africa, at first dominated by the East India Company [EIC]' (35). However, when the British state took over from the EIC in 1858, 'parts of the empire were still expanding in the 1870s (the Scramble for Africa was just beginning) when in other areas it was very old (the Caribbean) or had already collapsed (the USA)' (36).

Next, under the proposition that 'The tone and culture of empire varied wildly during its history', we are given an overview of the 'extended period between 1660 and 1807 when Britain profited from the evils of the Atlantic slave trade', and 'a long period when missionaries were [at first] discouraged [...] but then [...] encouraged [...] as a civilizing mission' (36). There were varying attitudes to cultural integration with the 'natives'. By the start of the twentieth century, 'India [and indeed the rest of the Empire] was divided along racial lines, with Europeans living, working and socializing separately from the people they colonized'. Yet, in the early days of the EIC, many of its employees had 'enthusiastically embraced their exotic new milieu', even including sexual relationships and intermarriages with the locals, though this stage did not last beyond the latter half of the eighteenth century (37).

The third, fourth and fifth propositions take us right to the heart of the matter: 'Empire was never unanimous'. While of course there were those who supported it, 'there was not a single phase of empire when the enterprise was not being criticised [by] establishment voices of opposition'. Fourth, 'There are intense disagreements about what happened during empire and what it means', raising the questions of when the first empire became the second and whether there was an overlap or even a third incarnation. Finally, 'There was no clear motivation for the establishment and development of empire', with Sanghera citing Sir John Seeley's oft-repeated aphorism that 'the British empire was acquired in a fit of absence of mind' (34-43). All through his extremely readable narrative of the British Empire – its formation, whether accidental or otherwise, its duration, vicissitudes and decline and, above all, its moral complexities – Sanghera makes a conscientious effort to present both or all sides of the conundrum with candour and balance.

'Emotional Loot' of Chapter Four is about how Britain's museums and other collections were stocked and enriched with 'looted' artefacts of all descriptions from virtually every corner of the Empire. Sanghera gives countless examples of such wanton greed and plunder, often disguised as souvenir-hunting and even academic curiosity but with an underlying sense of racial entitlement. However, while recording these colonial excesses, he also, as ever even-handed, notes that 'what happened with imperial loot was, in many cases, bitterly condemned at the time'. He notes that at the turn of the century a paradigm shift was on the horizon, with the Hague Convention of 1899 providing that 'Private property cannot be confiscated' and 'Pillage is formally prohibited' (57). Sanghera ends this chapter with a spirited discourse on the calls for the restitution and return of stolen artefacts and other material objects, for decolonising museums and universities, and he concludes that all these issues are now, at last, being seriously addressed.

Chapter Five, 'We Are Here Because You Were There', treads familiar territory and hardly needs any elaboration. Sanghera recounts the history of the black and brown presence in Britain over the centuries with many examples – freed or fleeing slaves from the West Indies, EIC-related traffic of servants of employees of the company, lascars and different varieties of migrants, temporary sojourners, students, doctors and other professionals, workers of all descriptions and, of course, princes and persons of independent means who set up first or second homes in Britain during the Empire and later. As Sanghera repeatedly points out, Empire was the reason why these people came or are here. Historically, all those born or naturalised in the UK or British territories overseas were British subjects and as such had the right of entry into the UK. That was confirmed by the British Nationality Act 1948 ([which in subsequent years has watered down this right](#)), and it was this that enabled colonial subjects from the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent and the African colonies to come and settle here in the UK.

While these ex-Empire incomers were characterised as 'postwar migrants' or immigrants, Britons living overseas (in places like Spain or Dubai) are usually referred to as 'expats', and those who have emigrated to countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada easily merge into their host societies as new citizens. Under 'Home and Away' in Chapter Six, Sanghera quotes from a study that found that British expats 'socialise mainly with fellow expats, and have no friends from their adopted country', with those living in Africa and the United Arab Emirates being the least integrated (91). Such aloofness is of course rooted in Empire, where the ruling establishment maintained separate clubs and observed rigid protocols of exclusion from the subject populations. Sanghera explores other aspects of the 'Home and Away' phenomenon in depth – alcoholism, schooling, 'historical British resistance to foreign food' (93) and 'the stress of reintegration on repatriation' (95) of imperial Britons. As for travel, 'Empire might have made us permanently internationally minded, but it may have also made us insular and closed-minded once we get abroad' (103).

In 'World Beating Politics' (Chapter Seven), Sanghera addresses the sequels to the dismantling of the Empire ('In the 1970s we had the dilemma of what to do about 60,000 Ugandan Asians and 23,000 Kenyan Asians' – though in relation to Ugandan Asians, Britain was only concerned about UK passport holders and duly organised their evacuation, as a result of which some 28,000 were admitted to Britain, while [the Kenyan Asian 'exodus' had taken place in 1967-1968 and was a somewhat different order](#)). He makes pointed references to the Suez debacle of 1956, the 1982 Falklands War and the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere as a legacy of the colonial past, leading to Brexit – 'now that [Brexit] has happened, it's becoming clear how it falls into a wider pattern of British imperial exceptionalism' (117). He even takes a critical look at how Britain has dealt with the first year of the COVID-19 crisis. Sanghera delves into and analyses the historical connections of Empire to almost every aspect of life in Britain today. 'World beating' this and that is a familiar British claim often bandied about in all kinds of global comparisons, but what we learn is that this is no more than an imperial hangover, hype and myth, with little substance in today's world.

'Dirty Money' of Chapter Eight is an apt description of the colossal riches of the slave traders, plantation owners and those of the EIC 'nabobs' who amassed vast fortunes from their activities to fund lavish lifestyles back in Britain in the form of stately homes, art collections and other markers of high status. 'Did slavery or money from India finance the Industrial Revolution or our railways?' asks Sanghera, but, as always, he tries to be fair in presenting both sides of the argument: 'Opinion is divided!' He adds: 'Was London mayor Sadiq Khan right when he declared [...] that much of our city and nation's wealth was derived from the slave trade? No, the claim isn't true even of empire as a whole' (140-41). However, in his Acknowledgements, he is emphatic in his view that 'slavery was a [crucial] aspect of the British empire'.

Slavery also features heavily in 'The Origin of Our Racism' (Chapter Nine). Empire was, of course, built on the conquest and subjugation of 'native' or 'other' peoples who were seen as inferior because of the perception that they had failed or were unable to defend themselves. Over time, however, when resistance led to rebellions, acts of disobedience and worse, the reprisals were swift and ferocious, and there were countless episodes of brutality and suppression. Sanghera discusses what happened during or following the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 in Jamaica, the arrival of settlers in Tasmania in 1803 and the founding of Rhodesia by Cecil Rhodes around 1889. He sums it up by stating 'as British empire grew and peaked in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it morphed into nothing less than a wilful, unapologetic exercise in white racial supremacy'.

In the next two aptly named chapters, 'Empire State of Mind' and 'Selective Amnesia', Sanghera continues with his reasoned take on the Empire as it was and as it has gradually faded out of public consciousness. He ends on a measured note in his last chapter, 'Working Off the Past': 'Sure, there is no consensus emerging on education, and British politicians generally resist public apologies' (214) for past wrongs. He does state, however, that 'Britain has already apologized for some imperial events and even paid reparations of sorts', referring to [Tony Blair's 1997 apology for the Irish Potato Famine](#). Sanghera also notes that 'in 2007 [Blair] said sorry for the British role in the transatlantic slave trade after meeting' the then Ghanaian president, and further, 'in 2013 we paid £20 million to 5,000 elderly Kenyans who were tortured during the Mau Mau rebellion' (215). Here, Sanghera fails to mention that [this payment was the result of successful court proceedings brought by the victims against the UK government](#).

Towards the end of the book, Sanghera proffers 'a single piece of advice to campaigners [...] to be positive'. Of course, campaigning 'has resulted in some change: many Britons have learned more about imperialism during the subsequent debates than they did during years of schooling [but] tearing things down also provokes vigorous opposition [and] counter-campaigns'. His recipe is 'to *create* and *build*', and he gives many instances of where this may be possible (215).

To conclude, *Empireland* is not an academic treatise but rather an informed commentator's singular interpretation of the history of Empire and its continuing impact on British society, based largely on a reading of secondary source material, personal experience and a sharp enquiring mind. In addition to the impressive bibliography, the book contains cogent endnotes but, alas, lacks a comprehensive index. The blurb on the back cover neatly summarises its message: 'Let's face it, imperialism is not something that can be erased with a few statues being torn down or a few institutions facing up to their dark pasts, it exists as a legacy and explains [...] who we are as a nation'. *Empireland* is deserving of all the plaudits heaped on it.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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