

An Oxford Scot at King Dubya's court: Niall Ferguson's Colossus

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Is America an empire? Should it be? Stephen Howe examines a powerful treatment of this most topical of issues, Niall Ferguson's Colossus, and views the book in light of the prolific young historian's ideological, political, and – not least – media journey.

The opening minutes of the Russell Crowe film *Gladiator* depict a dramatic confrontation between the armies of imperial Rome and the wild German tribes who resist them. The Germans reject the Roman demand for submission in fairly forthright style – by sending the emissary back to the legions' lines, still mounted but headless. As the gory figure gallops into view and the barbarians roar defiance, one of Crowe's legionary sidekicks says simply: "People should know when they're conquered."

It's a scene, a line, and an assertion that could be used as a starting-point for classroom discussion on any and every aspect of the history of empires. "'People should know when they're conquered' – discuss, with reference to ancient Rome, medieval Ireland, Victorian Maori or Zulu, 21st century Iraqis..."

In the media, a great deal of current debate about Iraq or Afghanistan pivots around the question: when *should* people recognise that they have been conquered

– or liberated? In academia, a large proportion of recent historical work on past British and other empires focuses on related issues: when *did* people recognise that they were conquered? How did they react, adapt, cooperate or resist? How did they think about those who had conquered them – and how were their ideas about themselves reshaped by the fact of conquest?

Meanwhile, behind these debates and researches lies a parallel assertion about modern global politics and its antecedents, less often explicitly posed but only a little less central to current debates among analysts, current affairs polemicists or indeed historians: "people should know when they are *conquerors*."

This would-be teachers' aid also carries its associated questions. How should United States – or British – citizens today react to being (or being perceived as) hegemony, imperialists or aggressors? What stories do they tell themselves about their countries' global roles?

How do these relate to their conceptions of national and other identities? How far or in what ways have notions of themselves as “being imperial” entered into, or even constructed, such identities?

Niall Ferguson's worldview revolves almost entirely around those two assertions. Some people – mostly poor and dark-skinned ones – need to recognise that they are conquered, accept the fact, indeed realise that it's in their own best interests to be so. And other people, especially Americans, must know and accept that they are conquerors and imperialists, shoulder the accompanying burdens, understand that such a role benefits everyone.

As Ferguson says in the introduction to his latest book, *Colossus* (2004): “Unlike most of the previous writers who have remarked on this, I have no objection in principle to an American empire. Indeed, a part of my argument is that many parts of the world would benefit from a period of American rule.”

A portrait of the gladiator

At only just over 40 years old, Niall Ferguson has been named as one of Britain's 100 most important public intellectuals by *Prospect* magazine, and even more notably, as one of the world's 100 most influential people by *Time*. After a glittering undergraduate and postgraduate career at Oxford University and several years teaching there, he soon achieved a repertory of prestigious posts worthy of some particularly well-connected medieval bishop.

For a time, he was simultaneously professor of political and financial history in Oxford, professor of economics at New York University, and senior fellow of the Hoover institution at Stanford. New York became his main base at the start of 2003, and in summer 2004 he is taking up a history professorship at Harvard.

Within weeks of arriving in the United States, Ferguson also found himself shuttling to Washington on government invitation, fraternising with policymakers from Colin Powell downwards. His existing profile as a pugnacious reviewer, columnist and TV pundit in London newspapers and on the BBC was rapidly complemented by the appearance of comparable ubiquity in the US news media.

With astonishing speed, Niall Ferguson has become famous, influential – and presumably quite

prosperous. It is hard to think of anyone else from the ranks of academic historians who has recently – or perhaps ever – achieved quite this combination of public attention, political weight, and continued scholarly productivity.

What are the sources of Ferguson's current eminence? Two creditable ones are immediately apparent. First, in contrast to several of his those working in the same field, Ferguson is immensely hardworking, prolific and talented. The high-profile intellectual cheerleaders for American empire – Dinesh D'Souza and Robert Kagan, Martin Kramer and Daniel Pipes, Max Boot and Stanley Kurtz (how did that last preposterous pair walk out of the pages of Evelyn Waugh and Joseph Conrad into the real world?) – are almost all crude, lightweight polemicists. The strand of US foreign-policy thinking that derives from Leo Strauss's disciples is, among its many failings, comprehensively and even proudly anti-historical in temper.

The really incisive analysts of America's global role, from David Harvey to Emmanuel Todd, have almost invariably been fierce critics, explicitly and sharply anti-imperialist. And most recent

historians of the British and other European empires have tended to offer pretty negative balance-sheets of the past colonial record, with the obvious implication that there are few encouraging lessons to be found there for the US today.

In this intellectual landscape, Ferguson stands out. Nobody could doubt the breadth, or indeed in *some* fields the depth, of his historical knowledge, the boldness of his thinking, his tough-mindedness. In an arena of debate suffused with empty moralising and pseudo-ethical posturing, he is unashamedly, even ostentatiously, unsentimental.

Second, Ferguson is quite exceptionally productive. By the age of 40, many academic historians are satisfied to have published one substantial book – usually a reworking of their doctoral thesis, on some very narrow topic – and maybe a handful of “satellite” articles. Ferguson already has six books to his name, not counting works he has edited or contributed to. None is a slim pamphlet: indeed one, on the Rothschilds, was so massive that its US edition appeared as two separate volumes.

Ferguson is now apparently preparing at least three

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more book projects: a study of the second world war, a biography of the banker Seymour Warburg, and an analysis of global demographic trends (about which he has recently published several short articles).

The torrent of words has become more profuse over time and the issues it addresses ever bigger. Ferguson's first book, *Paper and Iron* (1995), dealt with a relatively specialist theme: Hamburg businessmen in the early 20th century. Yet even it broached far wider questions: the relations between financial markets and politics, the origins and consequences of the first world war, the political effects of inflation.

This last emphasis, especially, may hint at something enduringly significant for Ferguson's *Weltanschauung* – for it so closely echoes British, indeed specifically Thatcherite, obsessions of the 1980s. This era and its associated ideology shaped the young Oxford historian; it continues to resonate for the slightly older transatlantic pundit. Indeed, it is plausible to suggest that Ferguson imagines himself playing an intellectual role vis-à-vis the Bush White House comparable to Margaret Thatcher's in relation to the Ronald Reagan administration.

Niall Ferguson's public, ideological persona, now assiduously cultivated on both sides of the Atlantic, offers in this light another answer to the question asked above about the sources of his current eminence. It is that Ferguson repetitively pushes a few big, bold, simple, and intellectually extremely dubious ideas; and that they are ideas which many people, including some immensely powerful people, want to hear.

Ferguson's claims flatter some giant egos, reinforce some vulnerable self-images, confirm some pervasive prejudices. It is tempting, if a little mean-spirited, to see in his developing career path an echo of others which his own writing on British imperialism repeatedly highlights: those of the numerous gifted Scots who beat a track to the centre of an empire's power, and flourished as its loyal servants.

A trail of blood, tears – and money

In 1998, Niall Ferguson published two enormous books in rapid succession: *The World's Banker* (US title, *The House of Rothschild*), and *The Pity of War*. The former is still seen by many as his best, a view endorsed in an interview by Ferguson himself. It is

based on extensive archival research, in contrast to his later work; but it also anticipates the latter in the several bold and wide-ranging claims that emerge from the mass of detail. Ferguson's narrative of the 18th-century development of an international bond market, with the Rothschild dynasty as its leading players, contains an important part of the origins of globalisation, of European colonial expansion, even of the defeat of Napoleon.

The *Pity of War* involved less detailed research than *The World's Banker* and was less lavishly praised by fellow scholars – but it made a bigger public splash and sold far better. It established the pattern for his more recent (and even more attention-grabbing) work by offering a sweeping reinterpretation of a very familiar, much-debated topic: the origins of the first world war.

Here, Ferguson emphasised British statesmen's mistakes and misconceptions, especially about Germany. Had they been wiser, they might well have decided to stand aside from the conflict. 1914 would then have witnessed a limited central European war rather than a global one. Germany would have won it. There would have been no Russian revolution, no Adolf Hitler, and the British empire might have lasted far longer.

As all this suggests, Ferguson was developing a strong taste for "what if...?" speculation – what academics rather ponderously call "counterfactuals" and Ferguson more trendily retitled "virtual history". His own chapter in the book he edited on the subject proposes "The Kaiser's European Union" as the likely outcome of British neutrality in the 1914-18 war.

The Pity of War contained far more than such hypotheses. Ferguson utilised his impressively wide reading to present a mass of material on the financing of the war. This was where his expertise was manifest and where, specialists thought, his conclusions were strongest. But here too, he was acquiring a penchant for the scholarly equivalent of the soundbite: for example, his startling conclusion that it cost the Germans \$11,000 to kill an allied soldier, while the Allies had to spend \$36,000 for every German fatality.

The book, though, focused on blood and tears as much as on cash. Its passages on the misery of soldiering, the sufferings of the rank and file, brought in a dimension

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of “history from below” – a pathos, a quality of empathy, which neither Ferguson’s previous nor his subsequent writings have included. Indeed one of the most palpable, if not disturbing aspects of his current ideas about Iraq is the loss of this very quality.

The Pity of War was vulnerable to criticism: not least for overestimating Britain’s role and saying surprisingly little about that of France. A kind of “retrospective unilateralism” can be discerned, an augury of his later ideas about 21st-century American policy options. Some thought his neglect of France stemmed from a stronger force than oversight: a kind of disdain. Certainly, by the time of *Colossus* (2004), Ferguson’s view of French foreign policy had curdled into sweeping hostility.

A nexus of markets, politics – and force

Niall Ferguson’s next work in this breathless succession was *The Cash Nexus: money and power in the modern world, 1700–2000* (2001). In it, another facet of the Ferguson philosophy came fully into focus. As we have seen, he had been closely interested in international financial markets since his very earliest writings – and confessed to the abiding impact Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* made on him when he read it at the age of 11.

It would not, perhaps, be unfair to call Ferguson a “neo-Smithian”, in that his attention to the economic forces shaping world politics (though naturally he distances himself from *marxisant* economic determinism) centres almost entirely on finance and trade, and takes strikingly little notice of industrial, extractive or agricultural production, or indeed of labour. This has important, damaging implications for his view of world power today. Yet it also, paradoxically, lies behind one of the main strengths of his subsequent book on the British empire.

Empire: how Britain made the modern world (2003) – this, British, subtitle was intriguingly different from the American: *the rise and demise of the British world order and the lessons for global power* – puts the power of money, of markets and financial systems, at the heart of the picture. Imperial historians have too rarely done this in the past few decades – though Peter Cain and A.G. Hopkins had done so in their monumental *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, a far

more original and carefully argued book than Ferguson’s, and very oddly not credited in the latter.

Since the 1980s, and under the influence of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, studies of empire tended overwhelmingly to abandon economics – often politics too – and see colonialism in almost entirely cultural terms. Ferguson returned the economic balance-sheets of empire to the centre of debate. But he did so in conjunction with another, less welcome resuscitation of an old argument, a cruder and less enlightening one: simply, was the British empire a “bad thing”, as most post-colonial observers tended to argue or assume, or a good one?

Ferguson is famous, or notorious, for his forceful assertions that the British empire, and the model of liberal empire of which it was the foremost exemplar, was *good*. It naturally, though still more contentiously, follows that something on similar lines, run by the United States, would be desirable in the 21st century too.

Empire, published soon after 9/11 and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan, was a production – as a book, and still more as an accompanying TV series (which Ferguson scripted, presented, and oversaw as executive producer) – too slight to bear the full weight of that argument. With its coffee-table format, copious pictures but no footnotes, and with its attempt to encapsulate several centuries’ global history in a few sweeping theses, it is considerably more susceptible to specialist criticism than was *The Pity of War*. (For a more careful argument that British colonialism was an economically progressive force, one has to turn to older, less fashionable historians of empire like D.K. Fieldhouse).

As with *The Pity of War*, probably *Empire*’s most compelling theme was to do with the relationship between markets, political institutions, and force. Much early English, then British expansion was an informal, private-enterprise affair. But in place after place of the non-European world, British governments realised – often reluctantly – that to safeguard their investments and commercial interests, they would have to seize physical control.

It is not at all an original argument: the motifs of the reluctant imperialist and of the flag following trade (rather than vice versa) are long familiar in imperial

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historiography. But what followed from all this, in Ferguson's version, was overwhelmingly beneficial to the conquered as well as to the British merchants, investors or settlers in whose interests London had initially intervened.

The process "enhanced global welfare...no organisation in history has done more to promote the free movement of goods, capital and labour than the British empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries. And no organisation has done more to impose western norms of law, order and governance around the world."

Part of the problem here, to which we'll return, lies in Ferguson's presumption that "imposing western norms" is self-evidently desirable, and should be recognised as such by the colonised. But even leaving such contentious value-judgments aside, his is a drastically simplified, homogenised and above all rose-tinted view of the British imperial record.

The benefits he hails – free trade, the rule of law, private property rights, honest and efficient administration, investment in infrastructure, the introduction of new cash crops and expanded markets for old ones – were very unevenly spread and applied. Some carried a devastating downside: free-trade policies and a shift from subsistence agriculture to cash-crop production for export brought famine in their wake, especially in India.

Ferguson's response to negative evaluations of Britain's record in India is, in brief: insofar as Britain failed, it did so by not being vigorously interventionist enough. This is both strikingly feeble and inconsistent with much else that he says. Colonial-era investment in infrastructure, let alone in health, education or welfare, was in many places almost non-existent – except at the very end of British rule, and even then, it stemmed not from some inherent logic of the colonial mission, but from *anti*-colonialist pressures at home and abroad. And, an argument long familiar to imperial historians but which Ferguson almost wholly ignores, it helped hasten empire's end. An interventionist colonialism was its own gravedigger.

An inner contradiction is equally apparent in Ferguson's treatment of colonial atrocities, abuses of power, even massacres. Ferguson doesn't ignore them, but his allusions to them often sound very much like

"covering himself", and in making them seem far more exceptional than they were. The empathy with victims that marked *The Pity of War* is quite absent here.

Indeed, his entire picture of empire as liberal, modernising and uncorrupt is, again, strikingly one-sided. There was far more archaism, autocracy and indeed corruption than he ever admits. The notion of Britain's *liberal* empire entirely overlooks the institutionalised coercion of colonial rule, the mobilisation of custom, the invention of tradition, the centrality of race to colonial projects – and thus the inevitability of the colonised seeing alien rule as systematic humiliation.

British colonial rule did not, as Ferguson suggests, systematically spread the "rule of law" among its subjects, or extend to them the legal rights enjoyed by Britain's own inhabitants. On the contrary, while white settlers in the empire usually had such rights as well as gaining substantial economic benefits from the imperial connection, most "natives" remained subject to quite separate and far more punitive legal codes. Moreover, in an irony that Ferguson seems to miss, a great deal of colonial expansion and conquest itself breached even the embryonic structures of international law obtaining at the time, let alone those elaborated since 1945.

The other side of Ferguson's finessing of empire's agents and impacts is his indiscriminate tendency to view all opponents of empire past and present, from the Mahdi in 1880s Sudan to Osama bin Laden, as benighted cultural conservatives or obscurantists. This perception dominates the last pages of *Empire*, and is expressed yet more starkly in the closing moments of the accompanying TV series.

The astonishing slide from 19th-century anti-colonial resisters to contemporary Islamists already suggests the present-day payoff of Ferguson's historical picture. But there's another, still more crucial link between past and present – and between Ferguson's 2003 book on British power and his ideas in his latest tome, the new *Colossus* (2004) on America's empire.

A landscape of test of power, engagement – and will

Niall Ferguson argues that the British empire collapsed, above all, because of a failure of will to

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sustain it. It was in its way an admirable failure, for Britain chose quite consciously to sacrifice empire in the struggle against other, far worse imperialisms: those of Germany and Japan in the second world war.

This interpretation places far more exclusive weight on 1939-45 than most historians of decolonisation would do. It is flattering to British self-images to see them willingly forfeiting their global power in order to defeat fascist tyranny. But it ignores both all the evidence of growing British weakness before 1939, and all the efforts to sustain superpower status after 1945. Well into the 1950s and beyond, most British policymakers retained global, great-power *ambitions* if not assumptions, and a belief that empire (even if rebranded as "Commonwealth") was crucial to these.

As *Empire* hit the bookshops and TV screens in late 2001, Ferguson began amplifying the intended lessons for contemporary America. He wasn't the only pundit to begin speaking, in approving terms, of a new American empire. But his was perhaps the most intellectually powerful, historically informed, and (in terms of the range of media outlets) promiscuous voice.

The neo-conservative hawks in and around the Bush administration drew heavily on his ideas to make their case for the war in Iraq, and for a wider, less shamefaced US global interventionism. And while some conservative commentators have responded to setbacks in Iraq by seeking excuses or even admitting miscalculation, Ferguson has become an even louder advocate of foreign engagement. As the end of *Empire* already signalled, it's all about will.

America's rulers, the argument goes, should have recognised much more quickly, fully and explicitly that their country's role in the world was and must be imperial. By drawing the right kind of lessons from history, especially Britain's imperial history, they should have understood that a massive and long-term commitment is involved.

This is not only a military commitment – though that is obviously necessary, and must include (despite Vietnam) a willingness to accept casualties and far deeper resources of military personnel. (In one of the most bizarre passages of *Colossus*, Ferguson points to America's vast prison population as a potential

resource for a larger army!).

It also involves a commitment to extended colonial occupation of conquered countries, with many thousands of civilian administrators, all imbued with the skills, ethos and public spirit which marked Britain's imperial elites. Like Britain's proconsuls and district commissioners they must, Ferguson writes, create the "strong institutional foundations of law and order" necessary for democracy and free markets to flourish. "The proper role of an imperial America is to establish these institutions where they are lacking, if necessary ... by military force."

Nobody else will or can perform this role. The United Nations is a hopeless case. The European Union is too weak, too diverse, too inward-looking; in a rather ugly neologism, he dubs the EU an "impire" rather than a potential "empire". Europeans, moreover, don't work hard enough, are too keen on welfarism and economic planning.

In this, Ferguson is fortifying his consistently negative assessment of the European Union's prospects. It is not a coolly detached perspective, for his anti-Europeanism goes at least as far back as his student days (one of his first publications was for the Europhobic Bruges Group). But Ferguson does introduce a new element: in a wildly speculative if not distasteful demographic argument, he argues that Europe has too many old people and too fast-growing a Muslim population to enable it to act rightly on a world stage.

At the same time, he fears that the US may mirror Europe's infirmity: isolationism, short-termism, unwillingness to incur costs in money or lives, misplaced moral qualms. All may undermine the necessary will to power.

Ferguson is too clever to resort entirely to a simplistic, monocausal argument from collective psychology. He notes more structural impediments to the United States's becoming the empire it should be. He explores its economic weaknesses: the country's external indebtedness and domestic budget deficit, even though – true to his Thatcherite past – he attributes the latter far too much to welfare and social security spending. But it's the external debt burden, and the potentially destabilising consequences this has for the world

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financial system as a whole, which he justly sees as the more important constraint.

As with his earlier books, so in *Colossus*, it's as an economic historian that Ferguson is most persuasive. Across great stretches of *Colossus*, indeed, he writes like a very competent but rather tendentious economic journalist: summarising data on investment, productivity, or working hours.

But even on this front there are some highly contestable claims. Ferguson dismisses any notion that US actions in the Middle East have anything to do with controlling oil reserves, because, he says, America is itself "oil-rich" and "long ago renounced" any such aim. Yet US oil production has been declining since the early 1970s, while consumption rises – and Ferguson of all people should hardly need reminding that prices matter.

Still, the tone in these sections is very different from that found in his more sermonising moods, whether within the book itself or in recent newspaper pieces. In the latter, the crude psychologism and the obsession with will return in full force. In the *New York Times* in April 2004 – the month of the US's devastating siege of Fallujah – Ferguson scorned the "squeamish" calls for restraint in Iraq. "Putting this rebellion down", he wrote, "will require severity" and "ruthlessness". His big worry was that such condign ruthlessness would not be forthcoming.

More recently, Ferguson is reportedly scornful of those upset at reports and images of torture by US forces at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. What happened, he suggests, was no worse than the initiatory "hazing" routine in many army camps and even student fraternities. Such claims naturally infuriate not only liberals, but also conservatives anxious to uphold the honour of the US military.

Such provocations display Ferguson at his most unattractive, suggesting the flippant amorality of the perennial Oxbridge undergraduate entranced by his own cleverness. It is also a reminder that Ferguson has written a great deal that is very bad indeed.

A world of corruption, terrorism – and disdain

Like *Empire*, the British and American editions of *Colossus* have different subtitles. In Britain, it's *the rise and fall of the American empire*; in America, it's

the price of America's empire. The implications of the two are drastically divergent: an empire already falling, or just one for which there's a price to be paid? The whole book threatens to fall into this Atlantic-wide chasm of inconsistency.

Colossus opens with a brief, preliminary essay in defining "empire" and related terms, which might have been more effective if it hadn't ignored many previous (and far more detailed) historians' attempts to do the same thing. The first half of the book is then devoted to a survey of American expansionism across the centuries.

Ferguson is surely right to argue that, by many if not most definitions, the US has been "imperial" right from the start – first through continental enlargement and expropriation, then overseas expansion in the Caribbean and the Pacific. He traces American empire through the 20th century, into the cold war era and beyond, and points out that although the main mode of expansion was not direct physical conquest, this did not make it any less "imperial" – although there were in fact more examples of formal US colonialism than are usually recalled.

In all this, as one would expect, Ferguson is lucid, factually pretty reliable, fairly dispassionate. Sometimes, indeed, the attempt at balance results in almost risible blandness. "It is perhaps too harsh to dismiss American rule over the Philippines as a failure. But it was certainly far from the success that Franklin Roosevelt later made out." This is what is technically described as refusing to have your cake or eat it. The historical sketches also offer some significant hostages to fortune. In relation to Vietnam, Ferguson notes: "Within a short time, the reality – that imperialists are seldom loved – began to sink in." The implications of that almost throwaway remark for the remainder of the book's entire argument are severe.

More dispiriting, though, is that Ferguson – usually so bursting with new ideas, both good and bad – has nothing whatever original to say here. He revisits very thoroughly trodden ground, and does so largely without even acknowledging those who have preceded him: *Colossus*' bibliography omits almost all the most important prior writing on US empire.

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the tone becomes less bland, more edgy. And he begins more explicitly to mount his case for empire. Decolonisation after 1945 was, he suggests (in an argument, once again, with a myriad unacknowledged precursors), mostly bad news for the former colonies. “(The) experiment with political independence, especially in Africa, has been a disaster for most poor countries ... Might it not be that for some countries some form of imperial governance...might be better than full independence, not just for a few months or years but for decades?”

Actually it sounds as though he is referring mainly to sub-Saharan Africa, and over-generalising even there, but he repeatedly suggests that his claims hold true for the whole post-colonial world. Its problem, he urges, “is simply misgovernment: corrupt and lawless dictators whose conduct makes economic development impossible.” The assertion is, of course, far too simple. And he soon drops the pretence of openness, affirming far more categorically that “in most cases, (poor countries’) only hope for the future would seem to be intervention by a foreign power capable of constructing the basic institutional foundations that are indispensable for economic development.”

If Africa, and by slightly slippery extension the whole ex-colonial world, comes off pretty badly in Ferguson's account, the Middle East fares still worse. Dismissing (rightly) the notion of a “clash of civilisations” between Islam and the west, he suggests instead that the region as a whole has a “distinctive civilisation of clashes, a dysfunctional culture in which rival religions and natural resources supply much of the content of political conflict, but the *form* is the really distinctive thing. That form is of course terrorism.” So much is absurdly, disgracefully wrong here – and in the chapter on the Middle East which those words herald – that one hardly knows where to begin. From the idea of a whole vast region possessing a single “dysfunctional culture” to the bizarre claim that terrorism is “distinctive” to the Middle East, all this is not only analytically useless, but simply insulting. Its inadequacy has much to do with what Ferguson has read about the area and its history – and, more to the point, what he *hasn't* read. He cites a handful of the most conservative (and most pro-Israeli) American and British historians of the region, like Bernard Lewis

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or Elie Kedourie. The works he mentions are invariably either very old, or (as with Lewis's recent productions) almost as superficial and suffused with disdain for Arabs and Muslims as Ferguson's own. If he has ever looked at anything substantial on the history of Iraq, or of any other country in the region, there is no sign of it. Neither in *Colossus* nor in *Empire* is a single Arab author acknowledged.

A pattern of reading, selection – and evasion

This is merely an extreme instance of a much broader, deeply disconcerting pattern. Niall Ferguson is immensely widely read in a great range of fields. But that reading is almost entirely confined to the boundaries of the North Atlantic world. In most of his books, he drops in literary allusions. But these are to a tediously predictable and narrow spectrum of writers.

On American empire, he quotes or alludes to *Moby Dick*, to Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, and his old, regularly recycled favourites Rudyard Kipling and John Buchan. It seems not to have occurred to him that any Iraqi poet or novelist – or, say, Abdelrahman Munif's Saudi historical novels *The Trench* and

Cities of Salt, in which American influence and the control of oil are central themes – might offer something relevant.

In *Colossus*, Ferguson refers to a couple of Indian-born economists, but in relation to contemporary global economic trends, not to India's own history or even the Raj. The only works on the latter by Indians which Ferguson cites are an outline economic history by Tirthankar Roy, and a brief, polemical essay by Tapan Raychaudhuri – and he doesn't really consider the latter's damning indictment of Britain's record in India. Indian historians are somewhat better represented among the sources for *Empire*; but even its extensive bibliographies include only one African writer, Joseph Inikori, whose work on the economics of slavery is so important that it could not be ignored even if one wanted to. That, though is one more African than is cited in *Colossus*.

The lack of generosity – indeed, too often, total disregard – towards other writers which Ferguson displays might seem important only to academics obsessed with the small print of the history of ideas.

But on another level, it should matter to anyone who cares about giving credit where it's due, about not forgetting who first laboured in some particular vineyard. And where there's a clear pattern, as there seems to be with Ferguson, with certain *kinds* of writers and writing being ignored, then something more serious still is going on.

As Timothy Burke – himself a major historian of southern Africa – has complained vis-à-vis Ferguson:

“It's fine to argue that the British Empire really was about civilising and liberation after all, if you like – there's an interesting, subtle case to be made along those lines if one is careful and precise enough to control the terms and ground rules under which it is made. But doing so as a scholar, even for a larger public audience, ought to entail a certain amount of intellectual respect for an absolutely gigantic body of careful, historically precise scholarship that argues otherwise both in terms of specifics and generalities. Ferguson simply ignores a generation of historians outright, as if they never existed.”

This is not, then, a petty bibliographical complaint. The fact is that Ferguson systematically bypasses or blanks out every source which analyses or presents the perspectives of the colonised. There thus emerges a consistent pattern of distortion or one-sidedness: a pattern which tends to reinforce the prejudices of those he seeks to influence.

Much of the impact Ferguson's writing has had on public debate, especially in the US, stems from his being perceived as an expert historian whose arguments about policy are based on specialist knowledge. Ferguson is indeed a proficient historian with a great deal of accumulated learning at his disposal. But his authority does not extend to the histories of any part of the non-European world. When he makes claims about these, they must be evaluated as the arguments of a talented, opinionated amateur, not a scholar.

It is surely symptomatic that *Colossus* alludes to Robert Cooper, the British diplomat who shares Ferguson's affection for “liberal empire”, but not to Fred Cooper, the acute analyst of why “welfare colonialism” failed in Africa. *That Cooper* – who, as it happens, is also an NYU colleague of Ferguson – does what none of Ferguson's work since *The Pity of War* has attempted: giving attention and empathy to the ordinary people who suffered under empire, namely African slaves, peasants and dockworkers.

That whole side of the story is missing from everything

Ferguson writes about empire, past and present, British and American. Niall might benefit here from perusing the work of another namesake, James Ferguson's grim and moving books on the failure of “development” and the costs of globalisation in Zambia and Lesotho.

A moment of ambition, resistance – and judgment

Perhaps, even, Niall Ferguson could listen to Saddam Hussein. At his committal hearing before an Iraqi court in early July 2004, the former dictator invoked Kuwaiti abuse of and disrespect for Iraqi women. To most listeners, this seemed absurd and despicable as a justification for invasion. But Saddam is neither a fool, nor entirely out of touch with the gut-level feelings of “his” people. His choice of argument tells us something important and disturbing about how powerful feelings of humiliation and revenge can be. They are part of the immensely complex story of how, or whether, “people know when they're conquered.”

Niall Ferguson, obsessed with telling Americans to know that they're conquerors and act accordingly, cannot hear any part of that other story. He seems to think it is enough to point out that those who resist imperial power often (he would say, typically) do so in the name of deeply unattractive, inward- or backward-looking ideologies. Anti-colonial resistance may even rest on utopian, irrational and superstitious beliefs. That is true enough, but noting the fact seems for him to be a way merely of evading the near-ubiquity of such opposition and resistance, of refusing to *think* about it.

Ferguson's panoramic, intensely value-laden claims on the essential nature of imperialism depend heavily, necessarily on equally holistic perceptions of the alternatives to empire. For him, as we've seen, these would involve despotism, endemic disorder and economic decay for most of the world's poorer countries. For the world system as a whole, he adds, the likely alternative to US empire would be dangerous instability.

Post-1945 critics of empire, in stark contrast, inhabited a time and a worldview in which the alternatives seemed not only readily apparent and attractive, but to be on the road to global victory. Anti-colonial nationalism, post-colonial “nation-building”, new global solidarities of the formerly oppressed – all linked to varying but almost always significant degrees with some form of socialist project – combined to produce an optimistic, progressivist, even triumphalist metahistorical narrative of what Egyptian economist Samir Amin dubbed the “Bandung era”.

That moment, clearly, is not ours, and those alternatives to empire are not ones that command widespread faith or even hope, at least in the forms that they did during the moment of decolonisation between the 1940s and the 1970s. Nor is the notion of a global, "purified" Islamic *umma* as their successor attractive or convincing even to most believing

Muslims – let alone to the mostly secular intellectuals who write about, and against, empires today. Niall Ferguson's writing on empire past and present has at least the negative merit of challenging his critics to think harder about what kind of world they would have instead. It is a challenge which is still to be met.

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