

BOOK REVIEW

Veevers, D. (2023). *The Great Defiance: How the world took on the British Empire*. Ebury Press, Penguin Random House (502 pages). Hardback ISBN: 9781529109955. Trade Paperback ISBN: 9781529913644



This book brings to light admirable actions of resistance and defiance and interesting portrayals of indigenous cultures and customs, besides accounts of expeditions and wars against English colonialism. These are largely hidden from history and precede the Age of the British Empire which stretched over 1875-1914, according to Hobsbawm's (1987) classic. This captivating history of the years 1500 to 1800 required a voluminous amount of research by David Veevers (University of Bangor), to demystify the familiar story of conquest or even the triumph of early English imperialism. He presents an account full of detail on places, persons, actions, ventures and conflicts in all corners of the world, which curtailed the repeated series of attacks for conquest by the gregarious English colonizers. Indeed Britain "by the late nineteenth century had grown to a size and power of which its early modern architects could only have dreamed. Regardless of the outcome of the First Anglo-Maratha War, the Indian subcontinent would be at the epicentre of this expansion" (p. 421); besides India there were dozens of eventual nation-states in all corners of the world, from Ireland in Europe to Asia, Africa, America, now written into the 56 leaves of the Tree of Life, designed on the Anointing Screen of the Commonwealth, which surfaced during the coronation of King Charles in 6 May 2023.

The British appetite for the construction of an Empire seems to have opened with the publication of *The Principall Navigations* by Richard Hakluyt in 1589, who described the mosaic of people and places beyond Europe and mobilized "English settlers, merchants, diplomats, missionaries, navigators, sailors and soldiers" (p. 3) over the next three centuries to expand their island outward. The book highlights alternative indigenous cultures and how societies either accommodated and contained,

remained beyond English control. By the 1590s, the Earl of Tyrone emerged to unite Ireland and he was eventually defeated only after the English state was pushed to the brink of collapse (pp. 30-35,101). Ulster retained its independence after the success of Tyrone, but by 1607 the 'Flight of Earls' to Rome symbolized the end of a politically independent Ireland (pp. 40-41). Still, the "Irish being a conquered nation by the English, are therefore evermore mallitious unto those that conquered them, and so wilbe untill the worldes end" (N. Dawtry 1597 in Veevers p. 43).

Chapter 2, "Watery Graveyard", brings us to the other side of the Atlantic, to Newfoundland, North America, and its mines of precious metals. After some failures, the English landed in Ossomocomuck (today's Carolina Sounds region) in 1584, where the Algonquians resisted and forced them back. The 'Lost Colony' of Roanoke demonstrated the successful resistance of the Algonquians to endless waves of colonists, despite pestilence, disease and massacres.

Chapter 3, "A fruitful land", continues with the domination of the English in North America, after difficult expeditions starting in 1606, to what would become New England. The Virginia Company of London colonized a stretch of real estate between the Chesapeake Bay and the Long Island Sound and communicated an image of an uninhabited region (p. 73). But in fact, Tsenacomoco was full of Algonquian communities and a domain of paramount chiefdom. The ruler of 30 tribes resisted infrastructure building, and after a period of mutual exchange, the English became a burden (p. 84). War was not officially declared, but after famine and even cannibalism, the arrival of another English group, and the Anglo-Powhatan war, the paramount chiefs were weakened by 1613. At this point, the author details the role of children and the rituals around them and introduces Matoax, the daughter of paramount chief Wahunsenacah with the childhood nickname Pocahontas. She wandered playfully around Jamestown, immune from the escalating violence around her, but was eventually kidnapped, converted and baptized as Rebecca, then married in exchange for the 'Peace of Pocahontas' (pp91-95). Despite indigenous resistance, the English spread in the region, the Virginia company cultivated and marketed tobacco, and 'Rebecca' became a symbol of the Company's success in North America. She was even invited to the court of King James I. By the 1620s, the new English colony with its tobacco boom laid the foundation for English power in the Atlantic with the subjugation or defeat of the paramount chiefs.

Chapter 4, "Perpetual war without peace" is not introduced by any map, because we are still in America and follow a reversal: after the death

of Pocahontas and her father in 1622, Powhatan grievances mounted and exploded in a sudden attack by thousands against the English in their prospering tobacco plantations (pp. 99-100). After fierce battles, the Powhatans lost their hegemony in their homeland, but they remained resilient and launched another surprise attack in 1644 (pp. 118-121). The English still dominated the region, trying to displace and exterminate the locals, but Powhatan people survived the loss of their political independence and their descendants still live in the Virginia Tidewater region on the banks of the Pamunkey River until today (p. 127).

Chapter 5, “A Great power of men”, follows the Kalinago ‘Indians’, those “island-hopping, resourceful people of the eastern Caribbean” (p. 132). Christopher Columbus’ expedition from 1492 onward for the Castilian crown ended up in the Caribbean island of Guanahani in the Bahamas and called it the ‘New World’. The Kalinago were industrious agriculturalists and merchants, invincible by the Spanish or the British. They conceded to European trade in their islands but resisted any attempts of settlement in their lands, opposed attempts at colonisation in the Lesser Antilles and later the island of ‘St Christopher’ as a popular hotspot for the tobacco trade. It took a virtual genocide for the English and French to consolidate their victory with a treaty in 1627 (pp. 140-5). Still, however, the surviving Kalinagos who fled from their English and French assailants after the 1626 massacre, took the English settlement by surprise by 1640, killed and captured many colonists, and left only three islands to the English. They launched devastating annual assaults against Europeans in general until the treaty of 1660 (pp. 148-151).

Chapter 6, “Difficult to Subdue”, is again not introduced by any map, because it continues with new assaults for European colonisation of the Caribbean beyond 1660. The English had consolidated their commercial and colonial power in the northern islands of the Lesser Antilles and at their heart “the ‘sugar boom’ reshaped the entire Atlantic trading system” (p. 153). The insatiable demand for the cultivation of sugar plantations led to the forcible deportation or enslavement of Kalinagos and the English trafficking of enslaved Africans, too (pp. 157-9). The Kalinago war efforts continued, curbed but not terminated by treaties on the way, such as the Treaty of Breda in 1668. There were conflicts and massacres up to the near extinction of the Kalinago by the 18th century.

At the end of the period of “Resistance”, “with the occupation of Ireland, the spread of colonies up and down the Atlantic coast of North America, and now with control over the valuable Lesser Antilles, England’s Atlantic

presence rivalled even that of Spain's" (p. 180), with 250,000 settlers along a 1,500-mile arc of coastal territory by 1700. At the threshold of the 18th century England was reshaping "the Atlantic World into an exploitative environment of settler occupation, enslaved labour and commercial profit" (p. 185). However, the colonial landscape was still challenged by Irish, Indigenous American, Kalinago and enslaved Africans' resistance. Still today, the Kalinago Territory celebrates its culture amid global tourism (p. 182).

The second part of the book, "Hegemony", explores how the English Empire and its profitable colonial network struggled to establish itself in the Mediterranean and Asia. It discusses regions which refused to conform, and several dominant commercial and military powers of the early modern world, which challenged England's growing wealth and maritime power. The Javanese and Japanese ignored or expelled the English newcomers, while "the mighty Ottomans, Mughals and Marathas contained and subjugated them trading and negotiating with the English on unequal terms, and occasionally even using violence to keep them in place" (p. 9).

Chapter 7, "Merchants of Every Nation", takes us to Southeast and East Asia in the early seventeenth century. In Japan, the centralised military state of the Tokugawa shoguns obstructed the establishment of English commercial interests, and China exercised absolute hegemony over its environment. The island of Java in Southeast Asia was urbanized with people from all over East Asia, and Banten had become the hub of world trade (p. 190); but the East India Company did not match the success of the Chinese there. Portuguese, Dutch and English colonizers were trading in Banten. The Dutch who landed on a Japanese island (p.201) were obstructed and could not intercept the Sino-Japanese trade which flourished there. The English were beaten everywhere, from Java to Japan, and allied with the Dutch, reaching the point of piracy (pp. 219-220). The Japanese asserted their control over the region and "forged an oasis of peace and prosperity within a maelstrom of violent Western imperialism." (p. 221).

Chapter 8, "The Mogull's Chamber", focuses on India, the powerful Mughal Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and its long-term presence beyond the Cape of Good Hope (p. 223). In the early 17th century the East India Company of the English opened its first trade route with India. By 1615 the expansion of the English had overshadowed the Portuguese and the Company established itself at Surat, a cosmopolitan city attracting merchants from across the Indian Ocean (pp. 229-235). The Indian Emperors contained the nefarious ambitions of the Company, but

“rather than Asia becoming a market for English goods, as the Company had hoped, Surat abruptly reversed this dynamic [...]. In many ways, the East India Company had become an arm of the Mughal Empire, conforming to its demands, serving its interests and expanding its trade” (p. 253). After replacing the Portuguese, the East India Company thrived under the strong and stable arm of the Mughal government.

Chapter 9, “Pax Ottomanica”, resumes the Mediterranean adventure after the 1580s. The Ottoman Empire was a crossroads between three different continents – Europe, Africa and Asia – and “three of the most lucrative trading networks in the world: the Silk Roads from China and Central Asia, the maritime spice routes from Southeast Asia and India, and the trans-Saharan caravan trade in Africa” (p. 260). A group of influential and powerful women, the sultanas, asserted great influence within the Sublime Porte. The popularity of Ottoman culture in the later sixteenth century stirred English fears of the Ottomanization of society (pp. 264-5). Their ‘Turkey Company’ would raise capital from its members to invest in Ottoman goods and even conduct English diplomacy. In the 1580s Elizabeth merged it with its main competitor, the Venice Company, which had been chartered to trade with the Italian states, and in 1592 both were reincorporated as the Levant Company. Its trade in the Ottoman Empire exploded, but “as peaceful trade reigned between nations under the *pax Ottomanica*, piracy soared” (p. 268). The North African corsairs engaged in piracy, slavery and naval warfare, enslaving people for labour (blacks) or ransom (whites). The English fleet hunted them down, but they failed to curtail North African Corsair states. By 1628 treaties were signed in exchange for the recognition of Algiers and Tunis as legitimate states, and England usurped its leading role to the Venetians’ wonder and envy (pp. 270-8).

Chapter 10, “Unhappy Disputes”, and Chapter 11, “Bastards, Bastards!” are not preceded by maps, because they return to India after the 1660s when a new power was born: the Marathas (p. 280). They battled the Mughal Empire for control of the subcontinent and, after its collapse, a race between the Marathas and the East India Company was triggered, to fill the resulting vacuum of power. The Maratha horsemen succeeded after a spectacular war. Like the mighty Ottomans, the Mughals and Marathas contained and subjugated the English, trading and negotiating with them on unequal terms, and occasionally even using violence to keep them in place.

The third part of the book, “Survival” (p. 337), explores how Britain emerged as the hegemonic imperial power by the end of the 18th century, while Indigenous states and other emerging powers struggled to survive

in a world that was increasingly dominated by the powerful and effective British Empire.

Chapter 12, “A Green Tree Still Standing”, observes the Kingdom of Dahomey asserting its control over the trade of enslaved people in West Africa, to the disadvantage of the British slavers. The West African Kings, especially King Agaja, annexed his neighbours, seized the Atlantic coastline and the European trade therein, resisted British demands and set the terms of trade in the region. This was a remarkable achievement for the reconfirmation of Indigenous power in the twilight of the early modern period.

Chapter 13, “Between Fear and Hope” and Chapter 14, “The Most Powerful People in Hindostan”, are not preceded by any map because they return to India: the expansion and later instability of the Maratha empire in the 18th century, the emergence of the kingdom of Bengal which benefitted the East India Company, the rise of Calcutta as an autonomous jurisdiction and tax-free zone, and the eventual decade-long Maratha invasion of Bengal, which destroyed these regions and helped the parasitical presence of the British (pp. 378-381). A 1761 battle gave the Marathas a final blow and terminated their hegemony over North India, to the relief of the British (pp. 387-90). However, the Maratha horsemen reached Delhi (p. 397) and reaffirmed their hegemony in Western India, with a strong state apparatus and an effective tax system. The Maratha Confederacy was established in 1769, the horsemen punished rebels and reclaimed breakaway regions, and the Confederacy rose as the masters of India. The English were confined like an island in a sea of Maratha territories (pp. 400-2). Again, however, the balance was toppled with the Maratha Civil War starting in 1773 and by 1775 the English annexed large territories (pp. 403-6). Multiple wars against the Marathas, alliances with other Indians and treachery followed until the Treaty of Salbai in 1782, which cemented the dominance of “the most powerful and formidable people in Hindostan”, the Marathas (p. 418). Although the British overthrew the Maratha Confederacy again in the 19th century, this book closes here with a feast in 1783: “Nana Phadnavis brought the whole Confederacy together for the wedding of the century: the nuptials of the nine-year-old Peshwa at Pune” (pp. 419-421).

This complex research project spanning three centuries and presenting details so complicated as to make a summary hard, reveals a hidden history of constant resistance and defiance against colonial expansion. The Conclusion is deservedly entitled “Rewriting History”. This is exactly the achievement of the author of an excellent long complex work on

indigenous people, their cultures and their defiance constantly stirring and fighting to expel the English. The reader witnesses diverse strategies besides outright war, ranging from those of the Javanese and Japanese, who generally ignored or expelled the English newcomers, to those of the mighty Ottomans, Mughals and Marathas who fought, contained and subjugated the English after trading and negotiating with them.

The English were dissatisfied with the restricted lands of their island and kept trying to colonize the whole world, although they did not always succeed. “It was only with the formation of Great Britain following the Acts of Union between England and Scotland in the early eighteenth century that the balance of global power tipped in its favour. With extensive colonies in North America and the Caribbean, the largest navy in Europe and a commanding lead over the trades in enslaved African people and Asian goods, this new political entity became far more capable of projecting force overseas, in a way its English predecessor had not been.” (pp. 9-10). This was the beginning of Hobsbawm’s (1987) age of Empire, with British dominance reaffirmed in the 19th century and extended up to the early 20th century.

British imperialism was dismantled after the Second World War but persisted after decolonization in the illusions of grandeur reflected in the Commonwealth, which is pictured on the Anointing Screen (photos 1,2). Then, three centuries after the story told in this valuable book, connotations of Empire were repeated in the popular support for Brexit and illusions about the reconstitution of the lost Empire which was thought to be blocked by the EU. Today, the UK has joined the Indo-Pacific trade bloc (since July 2023), is negotiating with China, and reviewing its relationships with the EU, with the reconstitution of collaboration in the Horizon projects as the most recent occurrence.

The wave of decolonization, which has swept the globe and its social sciences in the new millennium and earlier, too, apparently inspired David Veevers to present a daring and demanding research project on global imperial history, deconstructing British colonialism and projecting the flourishing of indigenous cultures. In a richly documented book, he observes the encounter of Asian, American and African, but also European, societies with British imperial expansion and, rather than glorifying the latter, tells us surprising stories of indigenous power which counter the oversimplified and selective mainstream narratives of imperial powers. These alternative hidden stories are thrilling for any reader who seeks a balanced account including the perspective of indigenous people. In the process, the author

also highlights the rich mosaic of people, cultures and regimes which have lived in our world during the centuries before capitalism, some of which were as resilient as to survive until our days.

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REFERENCES

Hobsbawm, E. (1987/ 1994). *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*. Abacus.