

Roundtable

Imperial History by the Book: A Roundtable on John Darwin's *The Empire Project*

JOHN DARWIN. *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Abstract In an age when both the traditional book form and the world that the British Empire made are arguably in crisis, it is remarkable that big books on British imperialism abound. Contributors to this roundtable assess scale and genre as well as content in their discussion of the claims and impact of John Darwin's tome, *The Empire Project*. John Darwin's response is also included.

INTRODUCTION: EMPIRE OF THE BOOK

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Despite obituaries that proclaim its passing, the book remains a powerful force in British imperial history. The links between the book-between-covers and the imperial enterprise are historically complex, sutured in part by the singular, coherent authority they appeared to project and by the association of print in English with a certain form of manly sovereignty.¹ In twenty-first-century British Empire historiography, it is not just the book, but the big book, that commands attention. Niall Ferguson's *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (2003)—linked to a major television series on the subject—is a notorious best-seller, provoking heated debate about empire's pros and cons in and outside of the academy.² As Linda Colley wrote in her review in the *Guardian*, Ferguson's *Empire* is both an audacious account and a salvo in larger debates about imperialism: a palimpsest for current and future empires as well as a reminder that empire is “a most complex and persistent beast.”³ If size matters here, the scale of empire's accomplishment is matched by the big bookishness of Ferguson's claims.

John Darwin is arguably the don of big-book imperial history. *After Tamerlane* (2007), *The Empire Project* (2009), *Unfinished Empire* (2012)—each of these runs

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¹ Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr, eds., *Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons* (Durham, 2014).

² Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York, 2003).

³ Linda Colley, “Into the Belly of the Beast,” *Guardian*, 18 January 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jan/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview5> (accessed 15 February 2015).

to hundreds of pages, spans hundreds of years, and generates impressive sales figures, if the Amazon.com and Amazon.uk website figures are anything to go by.⁴ Like Rhodes astride the map of Africa, Darwin lays claim to a wide swath of imperial history. The sheer heft of his accumulated scholarship means that Darwin's books occupy a singular place in the field—and not only by dint of the space they take up on the shelf. They need to be reckoned with. In the current conjuncture, when the book as a form is imperiled, the weight of Darwin's work is surely a matter of interest—intellectual, political, methodological—to those of us who care about how empire history is researched, written, and narrativized.⁵ In convening this forum I have sought to prompt sustained attention to one of Darwin's tomes, *The Empire Project*, in order better to appreciate the accomplishments of this particular big book in the age of the short form and the even shorter attention span.

I chose this particular big book from among Darwin's three because, as Susan Pedersen has suggested, it is an important "cross-over" book: it appeals to scholars and general readers, and might well be used in both survey courses on empire as well as upper-level seminars at the undergraduate or graduate level.⁶ As well, its subtitle—"the Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830–1970"—stakes a claim for British imperial history in arguments about global and world history. Such claims are often suggested by other work in the field, but they are rarely countenanced full on, let alone on such a scale. So this big book not only occupies significant space on the shelf but also takes up questions of proportionality and scale that link Anglophone imperial histories to broader currents in the profession at large. In keeping with these concerns, and in the interest of allowing them a free hand, the initial charge to contributors was fairly general: I asked them to consider the monumentality of the work alongside whatever aspects of the book they thought had ramifications for the field of British Empire history.

Big books—by which I mean those that are oversized and materially substantial—are by no means new in British historiography. One need think only of the impact of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963): a giant in its time and the subject of numerous commemorative conferences in the wake of its recent fiftieth anniversary. The majority of us do not, I daresay, write books of this scope. Nor do we necessarily read them cover to cover, if at all. As Ann Curthoys observed in a recent essay on *The Making*, more than a few people she asked in connection with assessing the legacy of Thompson's book half a century on confessed to never having made it past the first chapters.⁷ One person I commissioned to participate in this forum withdrew because she just could not bring herself to wade through all eight hundred pages of Darwin's "empire project." Her response is perhaps a sign of the

⁴ John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire* (London, 2007); idem, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009); idem, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (New York, 2012). *After Tamerlane* has been translated into Chinese, German, Spanish, and Portuguese.

⁵ Indeed, it is a matter of great interest. As this forum was going to press, Darwin's work was the subject of another review. See Bill Schwarz, "An Unsentimental Education. John Darwin's Empire," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no. 1 (January 2015): 125–44.

⁶ Susan Pederson, review of *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970*, by John Darwin, *Victorian Studies* 53, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 321–23, at 321.

⁷ Ann Curthoys, "History from Down Under: E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* and Australia," *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 19–39, at 26.

times, where the impulse to embrace a “tl;dr” (“too long; didn’t read”) attitude is endemic to academics and other readers these days.⁸ Students in my spring 2014 graduate seminar on British imperial history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, exhibited similar fatigue, though they persevered with Darwin’s book (or so they said). The size of *The Empire Project*, together with the vast time and space covered, certainly animated the kinds of critique they developed over the course of the semester. The extent to which Darwin’s books are read beyond the Anglophone world of scholarship and opinion is an interesting question (in the absence, for better or worse, of an accompanying television series). All the same, there are many reasons to think about what work Darwin’s book does, what kinds of readers it hails, how it narrates empire, and why it matters in the current conjuncture, when the book itself as a form is arguably under assault and when the world system that was shaped by British imperialism, before and after 1945, is rapidly becoming undone in processes that are unfolding before our very eyes.

The Empire Project is a big book, but not simply a doorstop. Darwin makes far-reaching claims about the nature, character, and parameters of empire and he does so on a grand scale. Invariably, perhaps, each of the scholars who engage Darwin here takes an interest in the question of big imperial history and its consequences for the kind of story that ensues. Kirsten McKenzie praises Darwin’s capacity to keep the anarchic character of empire in view even as he makes a case for a global imperial system. Alan Lester finds Darwin’s breadth of knowledge humbling and signals the importance of Darwin’s claims for governmentality in histories of empire writ large. Seeing in Darwin an affinity with Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher or P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, Duncan Bell notes his capacity to combine political economy and geopolitics in what Bell calls “a truly global frame.” But it is with that enlarged and expansive frame that each one also takes issue. For McKenzie, Darwin’s grand scale entails a top-down approach that misses not just gender but nonelites. For Bell, it is histories of violence and racism that are occluded, dropping below the horizon as settler colonialism once did in imperial histories. Lester also bemoans Darwin’s comparative inattention to “the intrinsic violence of imperialism” and hence to the illiberality of imperial power, with respect to both indigenous communities and broader imperial cultures at home and away.

One unintended consequence of the contributors’ observations is that Darwin’s treatment of India in *The Empire Project* receives comparatively little attention, partly because none of them is a specialist in the histories of the Raj. At the same time, the relative absence of attention to India in their remarks reflects the rebalancing act that Darwin himself undertakes in the book: he does not downplay the role of a “militarized Indian subempire” so much as repropotionalize the commercial, geopolitical, and ideological work of the white settler colonies in shaping the globality of Britain’s imperial world system—and ensuring its racialized and racializing character.⁹ In this sense, Darwin follows an emergent trend in contemporary British Empire historiography that has attempted to put colonies of settlement like

⁸ Naomi S. Baron, “The Plague of tl;dr,” *The Chronicle Review*, 9 February 2015, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Plague-of-tl-dr/151635>, accessed 7 May 2015. See also Elaine Freedgood on “the brief consolations of short-acting texts” in *Victorian Writing about Risk* (Cambridge, 2000), 3, and Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi’s Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

⁹ Pederson, review of *The Empire Project*, 322.

Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa back into the dominant narrative line of empire historiography. Robust traditions of “national histories” of these places and spaces have abounded, of course. But as the multivolume set of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* testifies, they have struggled to register as legitimate sites of imperial history in the last decade or so. Such visibility has its costs; empire history is not coterminous with settler histories, particularly where indigenous communities are concerned. While Darwin does not necessarily challenge the Indocentricity of big imperial history narratives, *The Empire Project* nonetheless resituates the Raj in a broader framework than is typical in comprehensive accounts, with consequences for reader response.

There is no gainsaying the fact that through his big books, Darwin wields a big imperial stick. He does so in an extended historiographical moment of specialized topics, “small” subjects, and close readings. Somewhat uncannily, this forum appears in the pages of the *Journal of British Studies* at a time when practitioners in the field are in the midst of a spirited debate about the very nature of historical method with respect to scale. Jo Guldi and David Armitage have made the case in *The History Manifesto* that research, thinking and writing at a macrolevel is nothing less than imperative if history is to meet the grand challenges of the day. In their critical response, Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler reject the correlation between scale and impact as unproven. Moreover, they query the very logics of that connection, and historians’ right to claim it, as well.¹⁰ Regardless of one’s stake in this debate, it is clear that the contest between the short versus the long past, the big and the small narrative, is very much alive in British historiography as we head toward the third decade of the twenty-first century. So, too, is the question of scale (empire and/as world system) that Darwin’s book calls out, both by its physical size and through the wide-angle, metrocentric lens through which he narrates his big history. As this roundtable suggests, the relationship between scale and method—indeed, the very practice of scale *as* method—is a powerful, though perhaps embedded, feature, of how students of British and imperial histories write and think and teach now. In his recent *Journal of British Studies* essay on the imperial history wars, Dane Kennedy takes it as a given that we can all acknowledge that “it has become all but impossible for historians who study modern Britain to ignore its empire.”¹¹ The real arguments henceforth will, hopefully, be how—at what scales, and to what ends—we write its histories in an extended historical moment when the very premises of the global order that it shaped are being undone. Though space does not permit more than a glancing mention, I refer of course to the globally apparent revanchist project of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which is in the process of dismantling the Arab state system and the broader global formations that twentieth-century decolonization processes helped to establish. The simultaneity of social media campaigns catalyzing global jihad and the crisis of the book as a form bear thinking about as well, not least because the book has been a kind of sovereign western authority for hundreds of years—aspirationally, at least. Its uncertain future

¹⁰ Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014); Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, *The History Manifesto: A Critique*, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BwfV0JOkw-ehV0-R1a1M5MFowb2c/view>, accessed 7 May 2015.

¹¹ Dane Kennedy, “The Imperial History Wars,” *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 1 (January 2015): 5–22.

as an object between covers is one backdrop to the phenomenon of big empire books like Darwin's—a conjuncture yet to be historicized but one that our roundtable attempts to bring more fully into view.

Of course, there is no natural or necessary connection between book size and scales of history, imperial or otherwise. Catherine Hall writes big books that are granular in their analyses; Philippa Levine and Dane Kennedy have each written short surveys of empire that take on big narrative questions; and Levine and C. A. Bayly have shown how to think at multiple scales in books of great size and scope.¹² It would be a mistake, then, simply to absorb Darwin's book and responses to it into an argument for or against big history. But even readers sympathetic to the challenges of grand narrative like those gathered here conclude that *The Empire Project* overreaches. This is not because its macro approach is unwelcome or inaccurate, but because it has a totalizing effect: it appears to suggest that it covers all the ground of empire there is. As Lester, McKenzie, and Bell each suggest, despite its enormous erudition and its equally impressive scope and scale, *The Empire Project* is actually only a partial view of how empire happened and when and where its histories took place. This is in part because there is nothing all-seeing about any narrative, even (and perhaps especially) a geopolitical one. Like the global itself, Darwin's view of the empire project is neither self-evident nor total. It is what Sanjay Krishnan calls an "instituted perspective."¹³ Darwin concedes this point in his response, though he does not acknowledge that cultural methods are "developed" enough to pose any real challenge to his geopolitical approach. *The Empire Project* admittedly, then, obscures any number of consequential objects of analysis from view, including violence, gender, and the experience of the colonized and indigenous lifeways and responses. Darwin casts the problem as one of newness: cultural history approaches are still "underdeveloped" in his view—an uncanny echo of colonial developmental schemes and their convictions about the comparative adolescence of those in tutelage. This is arguably a red herring. The problem might equally be viewed as one of scalability, which until quite recently in the long game of British Empire historiography tended to be the litmus test of legitimate imperial history. Darwin's claim in his book and in his response to the three critics here is that the geopolitical—that is, what can be seen of imperialism from ten thousand feet—is what counts as empire per se.

The scalable view is hardly disinterested or innocent of power. Indeed, the valorization of big scale potential may be traced directly to the plantation and the factory, those exemplarily modern projects born of imperial ambition and designed expressly so that they could be calibrated and recalibrated for expansion, growth, and market conquest.¹⁴ As the histories of those empire projects have manifestly shown,

¹² For big books that historicize interiority, see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867* (Chicago, 2002) and eadem, *Macaulay and Sons: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven, 2012). For short textbooks that cover wide swaths of time and space, see Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (Harlow, 2007) and Dane Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880–1945* (New York, 2002). For big books that analyze on multiple scales see Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York, 2003) and C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Malden, 2003).

¹³ Sanjay Krishnan, *Reading the Global: Troubling Perspectives on Britain's Empire in Asia* (New York, 2007), 5.

¹⁴ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "On Nonscalability: The Living World is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales," *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 505–24.

big-scale thinking requires the smoothing out of difference, the erasure of entanglements, the violence of sameness, the flattening of contingencies, and most often, a neglect of those on the lower rungs.¹⁵ In fact, all these scalable processes have been made to happen in the name of universalizing patterns of which empire itself has been, and remains, a notably multiscalar—and hence ultimately fragile—delivery system. If Darwin’s big imperial history approach is the kind of history that Guldi and Arnold are hoping for, then his “empire project,” historical and historiographical, surely raises fruitful and knotty questions about method, orientation, and scale for the field and for the discipline as a whole.

Whether large or small, the book as a material object has been a similar kind of delivery system, of both universal ideas and fractious, multidimensional histories about empire and much more. Its associations with English imperial claims to authority, sovereignty, and superiority are especially noteworthy in historical terms—attributes that have come under assault not just as a result of the rise of alternative media but through challenges to the phenomenon of English-only books masquerading as “global” history or literature. Though not quite disappeared from the rear-view mirror of history, the book itself is, like today’s various empire projects, arguably in crisis, if not everywhere globally then certainly quite visibly on the world stage. Is the preponderance of big empire books a defensive response to these developments? Students of British imperial history might do well to ponder the possibilities. Meanwhile, as forms, empire and the book are being made, unmade, and remade again by social media before our very eyes. These trend lines may throw the viability of all big books into question; they might also create new markets for them. At the very least, they make the appeal and circulation of the British imperial history tome a matter of curiosity and, I hope, of urgent historical debate as well. If empire history is to be something more than just a big book project, we too must fight: not *for* it in any one incarnation, but *about* it in all its diverse and perverse iterations. In Darwin’s view, the assimilation of both British and British Empire history to global history is one solution on the horizon. If that is only to be a scalar solution, I am not so sure it is the best option. As the cut and thrust of this forum shows, in order to understand what empire was and is, we must all read—and write and teach and argue over—imperial histories at every possible scale imaginable, using all the methods at our disposal and engaging any and all interlocutors in our sights. We must also look beyond the precincts of our particular patches, whether Oxford, Illinois, Sydney, Cambridge, or Sussex, and debate those whose methods seem unpersuasive or whose books seem too big. We hope this roundtable is one such endeavor.

¹⁵ By some definitions, this amenability to recontextualization is one characteristic of the global itself. See Aiwaha Ong and Stephen Collier, eds., *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics and Ethics as Anthropological Problems* (Malden, 2004), 11.