THE LION'S SHARE

A short history of British Imperialism 1850-1983

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second edition

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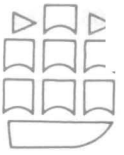

Longman London and New York

Longman Group Limited
Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow
Essex CM20 2JE, England
Associated companies throughout the world

Published in the United States of America
by Longman Inc., New York

© Longman Group Limited 1975
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First published 1975
Second edition 1984

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Porter, Bernard
The lion's share: a short history of British imperialism 1850–1983. – 2nd ed
1. Great Britain – Foreign relations – 1837–1901 2. Great Britain – Foreign relations – 20th century
I. Title
325'.32'0941 DA18

ISBN 0–582–49387–0

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Porter, Bernard
The Lion's Share
Bibliography: p.
Includes index
1. Great Britain – History – Victorian – 1837-1901. 2. Great Britain – History – 20th Century. 3. Great Britain – Colonies – History. 4. Great Britain – Foreign relations – 1837-1901. 5. Great Britain – Foreign relations – 20th century. I. Title II.
D.A.16.P67 1984 909'.097 124108 83–25528
ISBN 0–582–49387–0 (Pbk)

Set in IBM Baskerville 11 on 12 pt
Printed in Singapore by
Selector Printing Co.

The Lion's Share

For Deirdre
and in memory of Mamie and Helen

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Preface

This book was written in order to fulfil a need, which was for a general descriptive and explanatory history of British colonialism since the middle of the nineteenth century. It differs from histories of the British *empire*, of which there are several, in concentrating on the processes and manifestations of real British power, influence and responsibility in the world; which disqualifies certain countries, like Canada and Australia, which figure large in histories of the empire but which almost never in our period were effectively ruled from Britain; and qualifies some other areas, notably the middle east and China, which were not colonies but were more affected by 'colonialism' than many countries that were. It also differs from histories of the British empire in being more Anglocentric in its perspective: not concerned at all with what happened in different parts of the empire unless and until it affected the policies and activities of Britain or Britons, and then only in so far as it affected them. The aim of the book is to explain Britain's relationship with the world outside Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, why she chose in the late nineteenth century in some areas to convert that relationship into a formal colonial one, how she and her agents ruled their empire all the way through, and how and why she gave it up.

Of course there are omissions, and biases. Some of the omissions are arbitrary – such as that of Ireland, which in many ways was treated and reacted like a colony, and has only been omitted on the (inadequate and inconsistent) ground that it was not called one. Others may be justified on the grounds that not everything can be included, but only those things relevant to the main concerns and main themes of the book: though even

this blanket excuse will not cover all the gaps, some of which may be indefensible even by my own criteria. The subject as I have defined it is a broad and amorphous one, which renders any rules of selection highly fallible. It is also a subject bristling with controversies and – in many of the books which touch on it already – laden with biases. This book tries as far as possible to avoid bias, mainly by short-circuiting most of the controversies. The small controversies can be short-circuited usually because they do not really affect the broad issues. The big controversies are more difficult to avoid, and especially the biggest current one, which is about whether or not imperialism was an inevitable stage of capitalism. What I have tried to do on the latter issue is, at different points in the narrative, to describe and discuss some of the possible connexions between 'imperialism' and 'capitalism'. I believe that this discussion is constructive, but inconclusive on the main issue: which is for philosophers to pronounce on, and not historians, because it rests on general interpretations of causation and human motivation. This sounds agnostic: which on the whole the book is. It is agnostic especially so far as broad value-judgments are concerned, which on the phenomenon of 'imperialism' I believe to be as pointless as value-judgments on the industrial revolution, because it was just as little a matter of real choice. On smaller issues value-judgments abound in this book. But I believe them to be easily detectable, consequently easy to discount if required, and not affecting the main themes.

There are broad themes in the book. One is that 'imperialism', as the word is generally understood, was for Britain (it may not have been for other countries) a symptom and an effect of her decline in the world, and not of strength. Another theme is to do with the part the empire played in obscuring but at the same time aggravating a deep-seated malaise in the British national economy which set in around 1870. A third theme is that the empire was 'controlled' very much less by Britain than it controlled her; that all along she could only hold on to it by compromising her freedom of action considerably, and in the end could not even do that. My general impression of the empire over its last 100 years is that it was moulded far more by events than it moulded events: which perhaps diminishes its significance a little, but not its interest.

In the past fifteen or twenty years a great deal of seminal work has been done by academics on the history of British colonialism. Not much of this has percolated through into the more popular literature on the subject, which is often the work of non-academics with little idea of what the academics are doing. One of the purposes of this book is to try to bridge the gap, to put a line down (if this is not thought too patronising) from the ivory tower to a wider readership, which may be interested to know what one academic, who is young enough (just) not to have had experience of it or to have formed any deep emotional commitment one way or the other over it, thinks of the empire it used to call its own. My aim has been to marry a scholarly approach with a readable style, which may yet get me into trouble both with scholars and with general readers, but which is, I believe, a venture worth embarking on.

I should like to record my thanks to the librarians of Hull and Cambridge Universities, where most of the preparation for this book was done; to Professor Glyndwr Williams, Queen Mary College, London, who read the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions on it; and to my wife Deirdre, who on occasions during the final months of its writing must have wondered whether I was married to her or to the British empire, but suffered us both cheerfully.

References to sources, indicated in the text by figures in square brackets, are at the end of the book. Some of them are bibliographical references which may be of more general interest and value to those who would like to follow up particular themes. These are indicated in the text by asterisks against their reference numbers. A shorter, more general bibliography is also included.

Bernard Porter
Cottingham, North Humberside
July 1974

Preface to the second edition

The first edition of this book stopped around 1970. Since then the disintegration of the former British empire has, entirely predictably, gone on apace. At one time the pace was so fast that it seemed as though it might affect the integrity of the United Kingdom itself. That has not happened yet. But in the meantime Britain has changed in other ways in response to her empire's decline and fall. Some of these changes are discussed in a new section in the final chapter. Otherwise the book is substantially as it was.

Bernard Porter
Cottingham
August 1983

Acknowledgements

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Contents

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Chapter I

An empire in all but name: the mid-nineteenth century

The world market The term 'empire' had its origin in a Latin word associated with notions of 'command' or 'power'. Generally, however, its meaning has been a little more specialised – though not much more. It was never a definitive or generic term like 'republic' or 'democracy'. Its usage was determined more by historical accident than by semantic design. Usually it could mean one of two things. It could mean simply the country presided over or the authority exercised by a ruler who happened to be called an emperor. Or, more helpfully, it could mean the territorial possessions of a state (whose head might or might not be styled 'emperor') outside its strict national boundaries. It was in this latter sense that Britain and her overseas territories in the late nineteenth century together comprised an empire.

On the surface this empire seemed an uneven and inconsistent kind of political entity, as indeed it was. Its different constituents were united in very little apart from their common allegiance to the British crown. Even the degree of this allegiance, the extent to which the Queen's ministers could presume on a colony's loyalty for help in a crisis, varied in practice from one part of the empire to another. There was no single language covering the whole empire, no one religion, no one code of laws. In their forms of government the disparities between colonies were immense: between the Gold Coast of Africa, for example, ruled despotically by British officials, and Canada, with self-government in everything except her foreign policy, and here London's control was only hazily defined. In between, Nigeria was ruled by a commercial company, the states of

Australia by their own prime ministers, Sierra Leone by a governor, Sarawak by a hereditary English rajah, Somaliland by a commissioner responsible to India, Egypt by a consul-general who in theory only 'advised' a native Egyptian cabinet, Ascension Island by a captain as if it were a ship. India was a full-blown oriental autocracy at its outer edges, but with a jumble of 'princely states' cluttering up its interior, where the local nawabs held sway under the protection of a British 'viceroy' responsible to an *empress* – Victoria, who was merely Queen of the British empire, but Empress of this separate empire within it. There was no kind of overall logic – which is chiefly why the British empire held together at all. Government was adapted to local conditions, and the British were happy with the discord of it all so long as the music went on playing.

Underneath this confusion, however, there was a kind of rationality. Fundamentally the empire – true to its derivation – was a manifestation of British power and influence, and whatever strange individual shapes they took the colonies all shared this common characteristic, that they owed their origins in some way to British economic, political and cultural predominance in the world. This is almost a truism, but there is an important and less obvious rider to it: that the colonies were not the *only* manifestations of that predominance. Other countries outside the empire could be dominated or controlled by one means or another from Britain almost as closely as her colonies – more closely than some. In a way Argentina was as much a British 'colony' as Canada, Egypt or even Persia more strictly controlled by Britain than Nigeria. British paramountcy was spread over a wide area. The colonies, in fact, were merely the surface outcrops of a much broader geological reef, of a wider system of authority and influence whose frontiers were not at all coterminous with the boundaries of the area painted red on the map. While the empire, therefore, may have been a manifestation of British world power, it was not by itself an accurate reflection of the extent of that power, or a helpful guide to its structure. Conversely, to seek to explain imperial history by reference only to imperial territories is like trying to account for scattered surface rock formations without digging for the connecting bedrock beneath.

The mid-Victorians themselves, or at least some of them,

knew how wide their empire was spread. There was much disparaging talk of empire at the time, but generally what was objected to was a particular kind of empire – the old mercantilist relationship with colonies forced to supply Britain's industries with raw materials, forbidden to compete with her in manufactures, and prohibited from trading with other countries. The old American colonies had been in this kind of relationship to Britain, with bitter and long-remembered consequences. The apostles of the 'free trade' creed in the mid-nineteenth century favoured a more subtle kind of empire, a method by which (said a free trader in 1846) 'foreign nations would become valuable Colonies to us, without imposing on us the responsibility of governing them'[1]. The method was to dominate the world by means of a natural superiority in industry and commerce. Twenty-five years later this had achieved for Britain what Herman Merivale called 'almost an empire, in all but name'.

> By actual possession here and there; by quasi-territorial dominion, under treaties, in other places; by great superiority of general commerce and the carrying trade everywhere, we have acquired an immense political influence in all that division of the world which lies between India and Japan[2].

This 'informal empire' was the product of Britain's expanding economy. Its dynamism, the way it increased and multiplied the national stock over and over again, was the pride and glory of British capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century: the proof of its virtues, the excuse for its vices. It was the material groundswell beneath the early Victorians' bounding self-confidence in many fields, and beneath their ideal of 'progress'. It also took them into the wider world. Every year the industrial system devoured more raw materials and turned them into saleable commodities, and demanded yet more materials and markets; that its appetite would spread ever wider beyond Britain's national boundaries was therefore natural. 'The need of a constantly expanding market for its products', remarked the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, 'chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere'[3]. The result

was a constant expansion of Britain's world market to match the expansion of her industrial production at home. And because her capitalism was so much more advanced than other nations' – unique at the beginning of the century, still ahead by a whisker at the end – it was to Britain's economic blandishments that most of the wider world succumbed, more than to other European nations'.

At the same time the world market was, in a way, ensnaring Britain too. The proud name she gave herself of 'workshop of the world' might have exaggerated the extent of her economic preponderance; but it did accurately indicate its nature. The way Britain prospered was by manufacturing articles for sale abroad, which her customers paid for in raw materials and food. This international division of labour suited her well, and the pulling down of the tariff barriers against food and other imports in mid-century encouraged it, as it was meant to. By 1860 the value of Britain's trade with the world had tripled in twenty years[4]. Of her visible exports in 1854–57 (measured by volume) 85.1 per cent was in finished goods, only 8.5 per cent in raw materials and 6.4 per cent in foodstuffs. Of her imports, 7.3 per cent was in finished goods, 61.2 per cent in raw materials and 31.5 per cent in foodstuffs[5]. She could not feed herself, and her industry could not function without regular shipments of raw materials from abroad. This was painfully illustrated during the American civil war when cotton supplies were reduced and many Lancashire textile mills had to stop production. So the polarisation of Britain's trade had rendered her dependent on other countries for prosperity, almost for survival. But those other countries were also in their turn dependent upon Britain, for in many cases there was no other significant customer for their staple products. The ties of dependency therefore between Britain and her trading partners were mutual. (It was this symbiosis which many free traders believed would guarantee world peace, by making war – and the consequent rupture of vital commercial ties – clearly unprofitable and even in some cases suicidal.)

The enormous trading opportunities open to her as the first modern industrial nation, with a virtual monopoly of manufactures, encouraged Britain to concentrate on profitable foreign markets at the expense of an under-exploited domestic market.

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