

TOWARDS A REAPPRAISAL OF COLONIALISM: THE LIFE OF SIR ALAN BURNS

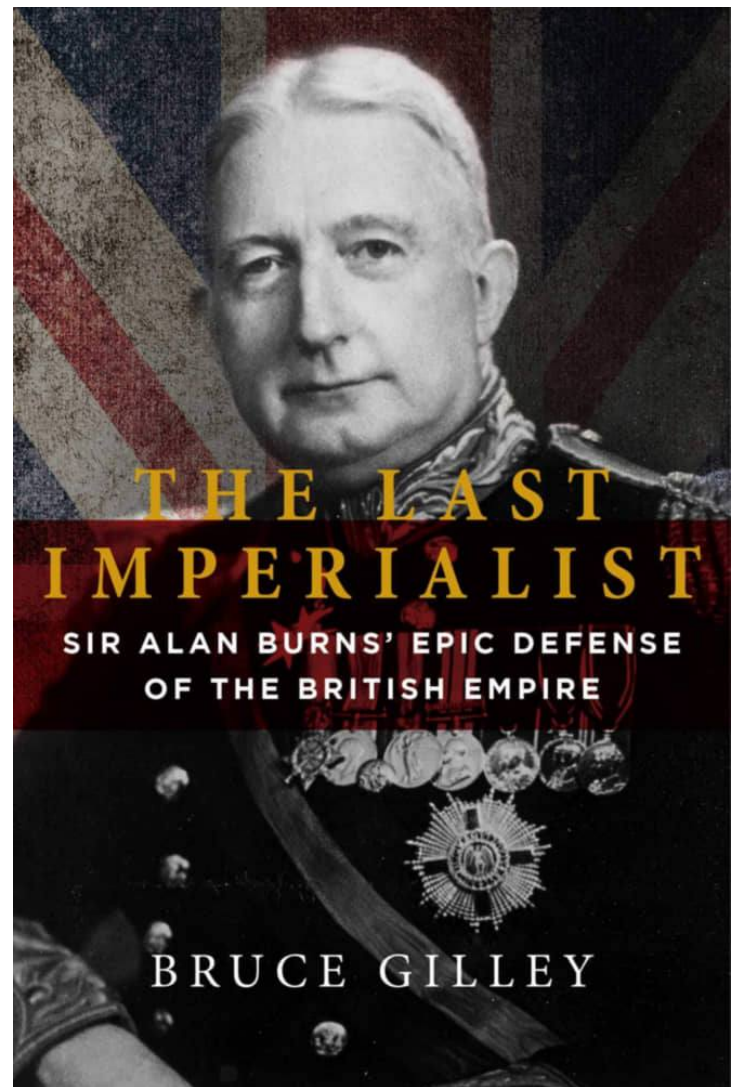
Posted on January 1, 2022 by Robert M. Kerr



In the modern Western, especially English-speaking, world in which "critical theory" (lower case!), i.e., ["any philosophical approach that seeks emancipation for human beings and actively works to change society in accordance with human needs"](#) has largely replaced empirical research in the Humanities; knowledge has been for the most part reduced to subjective opinion. Descriptive analysis has been supplanted by prescriptive dogma.

From this cesspool of learned ignorance, inter alia influenced by notions of "knowledge and power" (*le savoir-pouvoir*), espoused by the French intellectual chameleon Michel Foucault, modern "critical theories" (on race, gender, etc.) have become dominant. In the current caliginous academic world, driven on by publish-or-perish, hermetic peer review and the ability to churn out innumerable "scholarly" journals, this has becoming something of a thriving industry on campuses, and increasingly in everyday life. One of the hallmark publications of this was Edward Said's famous work *Orientalism* (for a concise rebuttal of Said, there is the work by [Buruma and Margalit](#)). Based on this and patterned after Foucault's post-modernism, the discipline of "post-colonialism" or "decolonial theory" emerged. One definition is that it ["is a title coined to describe the intellectual work articulating a broad rejection of Western European supremacy by colonial/racial subjects."](#)

Simply put, this activism disguised as science ascribes all the ills of what is generally known as the "Third World" to the colonial activities of European powers. As this work is largely idea(l) driven, all manner of "evidence" can be herded to prove the previously established thesis. This, as the French public intellectual Michel Onfray has shown in in his recent book *L'Art d'être français : Lettres à de jeunes philosophes* ("Lettre 6—Sur l'islamo-gauchisme;" Islamo-leftism, another postcolonial discourse which reintroduces pre-revolutionary theocracy), like all such "critical theories," works on the same scheme: essentializing, the liberal application of Godwin's law, verbosity, exaggeration, denial and amalgamation—lumping together antithetical groups of victims and perpetrators, real or imagined. When one looks at the world today, especially the in the former European colonies, one cannot but be heartbroken, in many instances. The question is whether such "colonialism" lies at the root of these countries' desperate state?



The book under review here, [*The Last Imperialist. Sir Alan Burns' Epic Defense of the British Empire*](#) is, to present my conclusion first, a well-researched and fact-driven antidote to the popular and populist mythography of modern theorists. The author, Professor Bruce Gilley, perhaps best known in the field of Colonial Studies for his (in)famous article, [*"The case for colonialism"*](#) (*Third World Quarterly*, 2017), is to be commended for this well-written vindication of the British Empire, what it was and what it wasn't. This biographical tour-de-force shares the same to-the-point literary gusto as the books written by the Sir Alan Burns, Gilley's subject. Gilley, like Burns himself, prefers intellectual honesty to going with the languid flow.

It should be noted here that this book is not a whitewash of colonialism. It is a realistic portrayal of many aspects of the last six or seven decades of the British Empire, based on the career of one of its major proponents, who held numerous key positions in various parts of it. The book opens with an ironic epilogue—Sir Alan Burns at the end of his career, learning of the death of his old adversary in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Dr. Joseph B. Danquah, dying in prison as a political prisoner of Kwame Nkrumah's regime.

Sir Alan Cuthbert Maxwell Burns, of Scottish descent, was born in Basseterre (Saint Kitts) in 1887. His family and early life on the multiracial and multiethnic Island, and his schooling in England. On p. 19 it is noted that Burns considered his limited formal education to be an advantage: "a strong character and sound common sense are far more valuable assets to a colonial official than the most brilliant academic distinctions;" university produced young colonial officials who were "full of zeal and theory" but lacking in what he considered most important "unlimited patience and a real sympathy for the people among whom the young officer will work."

The book goes on to describe his further career, from his own writings and those of his colleagues and opponents, initially in the Caribbean and later largely in West Africa. We see here a man who took his posts seriously, having a genuine interest in the people and places he served. This can be seen in many of his publications, such as the *Nigeria Handbook* which first appeared in 1917 and was appreciated especially by the indigenous population (p. 60). Later, from 1924 on, as Colonial Secretary of the Bahamas, Gilley eloquently describes the realities of life, balancing local and international interests (especially rumrunning into the United States of the Prohibition Era), encouraging and when necessary, goading the local parliament to do their duty and take responsibility. Here, he also produced the first accurate map of the Bahamas. When he left in 1929, his empathy and administrative skills were praised by all.

His next posting, until 1934, was as Deputy Chief Secretary to the Government of Nigeria. Throughout the book, we see how Burns adapted to new situations, especially the tide of growing nationalist sentiments after World War I. We see what the British Empire was and wasn't, e.g., p. 91: "It has been the policy of British colonial administrations to build up a national consciousness which would one day make it possible to give independence to a united country." The language may seem dated, but not the will to do good. On p. 92, we read: "With all its imperfections, European government in Asia and Africa has given to the native inhabitants of the tropics greater personal liberty and economic opportunity than they have ever enjoyed before." Among the challenges Burns faced were occasional uprisings,

often to do with the challenges caused by modernity; and the protestors or rebels can, historically speaking, hardly be seen as early forms of anti-colonial resistance, as they are often depicted in modern postcolonial historiography. It is clear that the ruled also saw advantage in British rule—had there indeed been popular opposition, it would have been no match for the always short understaffed British, especially during the Great War, when only a bare skeleton administration remained—or perhaps we must suppose that mass Stockholm syndrome is a defining aspect of colonialism?

Throughout the book, the voices of the governed, the alleged victims come to word in a balanced fashion, such as Ahmadu Bello (p. 92) “There was no ill-will after the occupation. We were used to conquerors and these were different; they were polite and obviously out to help us rather than themselves;” Chinua Achebe (p. 93) “Let us give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were scattered ones before.”

Among Burn's activities in this period was his pioneering work *History of Nigeria* (1st ed. 1929) later deemed “tainted colonial historiography,” and the foundation of the Lagos Public Library in 1932. Here Gilley notes (p. 95): “Along with the drawing of maps, the creation of libraries is another colonial endeavor that has been scorned by later critics as [devious and wicked](#). Having first imposed an alien conception on the outer geography of place, the colonialists next implanted an alien conception on the inner geography of the mind. Such libraries were intended, the critics allege, to create a pro-colonial native elite that would perpetuate European rule and train a literate work force to boost colonial profits. All those elderly lady volunteers affixing labels and dusting stacks are transformed by such works into powerful agents of imperial reach as they assist Africans to sign out copies of Baudelaire. ‘The violence of the library’ and ‘conceptual contamination’ are [stock phrases](#). The effect of colonial libraries was to ‘dismember the dynamism and effectiveness of the oral tradition,’ one alarmed scholar complained. ‘Library colonialism remains one of the most hidden but deadly instruments of neo-colonialism’ he warned. On those quiet shelves ‘the malignant influences of Western civilization are [diffused among literate Africans](#) like invisible bubbles of air.”

The next step is of course the [burning of books, such as practiced in Canada](#) as a “purification par la flamme,” led by a [self-invented Indian, Suzy Kies](#). This alleged incarnation of colonial evil, Burns himself noted (p. 97): “We do not try to assimilate the colonial peoples, nor to turn them into imitation Scotsmen—or even Englishmen—but to help them develop a higher civilization of their own, soundly based on their own traditional institutions and culture.”

Thereafter, follow accounts of Burns' next posting in British Honduras (Belize), 1934-1939, a stagnant backwater of the Empire when he arrived. His major activities here were road building, rediscovering the Mayan past which "offered a potential source of meaning and a unity for a place that had long been dismissed as nothing more than a timber settlement" (p. 107), including the founding of a national museum. Here, again, he worked to reform and make local government more effective and fairer. Upon his departure, again his achievements were hailed by even his most stern critics.

The beginning of the war found him in England, where he helped to broker the "[Destroyers-for-bases deal](#)." From 1942 to 1947, he was back in Nigeria, installing, in 1946, a new, more democratic constitution with an African majority. Here, in 1943, transpired what would be the defining moment in Burns' career, the ritual "Ju-Ju" murder.

The tides were however turning, Britain after the War had lost its desire for Empire, this murder case demonstrated the British government's changing attitude. While the ruled, who had no taste for being the victims of such murderous rituals, demanded and expected justice, the rulers were hesitant; cultural relativism was coming of age, as Gilley notes (p. 179f.): "Not for the first time, Western progressives who claimed to speak on behalf of the Third World were contradicted by actual existing Third World people." This seems to have been a turning point for Burns, who now increasingly went on record as a staunch defender of the Empire (p. 172): "The 'tyranny' of European rule has replaced tyrannies less bearable... In the past we have made many mistakes in our colonial administration and we will probably make many more in the future, but against our mistakes we can set a record of achievement which has not been excelled by any nation in the world, and on balance we have nothing to be ashamed of." The historical reality is that more often than not, the British had been asked (sometimes repeatedly before they agreed) to govern by indigenous peoples. As Gilley notes (p. 172) "most colonialism was done by colonials."

From 1947 until his retirement in 1956 Burns served as Permanent Representative of the UK on the United Nations Trusteeship Council. This is arguably the most relevant section of the book for understanding the present situation. The world mood after the Second World War was decidedly "anti-colonial." The Trusteeship Council, originally mandated to oversee the trust territories, largely former mandates of the League of Nations, or territories taken from nations defeated at the end of World War II, to self-government or independence, but which also sought to decolonize the remaining "empires" (mainly Britain, France, Portugal and Belgium). Gilley notes (p.195): "The more important question is whether the UN adequately prepared colonies for independence. On this issue, scholars have been

silent for an obvious reason: the failure of the UN to direct its attention to the post-colonial future was an inexcusable mistake, arguably a crime against humanity that the body continues to celebrate. Under the growing influence of anti-colonial voices, the UN became what one scholar called a "decolonization machine," more concerned with ending colonialism than with the lives left behind. It was a mistake that Sir Alan Burns would try to avoid." Here we see an excellent portrayal of how questions of good governance became overshadowed by emotive racial questions. The grandstanding professing the evils of colonialism was led by countries such as the Soviet Union, Yemen, Egypt, India or the Philippines whose democratic credentials were (and are) somewhat wanting (p. 219): "It is notorious that the most severe criticism comes from the representatives of countries where the administration is most corrupt, the treatment of minorities or the working classes is the most discriminatory, and the constitution so unstable that it is shaken by frequent revolutions."

The mythical American "anti-colonial" attitudes and policies are also discussed, who saw in every self-proclaimed liberator another George Washington. These countries often insisted on a prescribed timetable (as was the case for the Trusteeships, which as with Somalia was an utter failure) for independence. Burns noted that in determining when a colony was ready for independence (p. 209f.): "There are not enough astrologers assigned to the UN for this task." The question was as Gilley notes here: "What if the people of a colony did not want a timetable? Would it be undemocratic to force one upon them? Who exactly spoke for colonial peoples: coffee-house radicals in London, Soviet stooges at the UN or the elected native representatives of colonial legislatures? Part of the hypocritical incoherency of the UN policy at this time was the definition of what constituted a 'colony.' The criterium was the 'salt-water fallacy,' only colonialism overseas was considered 'colonialism,' expansion over land was seen as "nation-building" (p. 217f.)—ergo the Soviet Union with its Warsaw Pact Satellite states was not seen as colonial. That France and Portugal also saw their overseas empires as parts of their country did not count; the Belgians (Flemish, Germans and Walloons) noted logically that it would only be right if every UN member would be open to scrutiny for all groups ruled by a particular country ("Belgian Thesis" p. 218).

Having left the UN thoroughly fed up, Burns undertook further missions, such as in Fiji and in the Caribbean. He and his wife were back in Basseterre in 1967 when the new union of St. Kitts, Nevis and Anguilla were formed. The latter did not like the arrangement and demanded the reinstatement of British colonial rule (p. 259), forming a republic two years later, once their request had been turned down.

The tide had however turned for good. Decolonization was pursued on an international level, its proponents as Burns noted (p. 222) were “less concerned with the welfare of the indigenous inhabitants than with the spread of ideological propaganda.” History speaks for itself. Rushed independence—due more to the fact that the now defeatist colonial powers themselves jumped ship rather than mythical freedom fighters who often metamorphosed into butchers—had “virtually guaranteed failure in many places at the costs of hundreds of thousands of lives.”

But post-independence failures, famines, wars, rigged elections, refugee crises etc. are faded out while colonial atrocities, real or imagined, are highlighted, (p. 261): “Alan noted that more people had been killed by police firing on riotous mobs in independent India than in the entire period of the Raj—this before the worst violence of the 1970s and 1980s.” Burns noted correctly that (p. 262) it does no good to bend over backwards in avoiding any reference to these things. can only be retarded by a refusal to face the facts or to recognize that everything is not lovely in the garden of independence.” As for these states “until they are prepared to admit their own responsibility for much that has gone wrong, they will not be able to correct the mistakes and to achieve the status which all their friends wish them to attain.”

It is clear that neither Sir Alan Burns nor his defense of the British Empire can be deemed racist, patronizing or the like. He was a dedicated civil servant, devoted to both the Empire and the people it ruled. His goal was not a *Tausendjähriges Reich* or a dictatorship of the proletariat (both as the book notes, idealized by many colonial nationalists) or some other such ill-conceived utopian dream, but rather, though imperfectly achieved, to lead the ruled to self-rule of their own making, within the confines of inescapable modernity. Although many of his colleagues, as he often complained to London, were not up to his standard, others were.

In conclusion, we hope that this book will contribute to a recalibration of the debate on colonialism and the British Empire in particular. Not to nostalgia for what is no more (and probably never was). Merely to an empirical, fact-based understanding. The fate of many former colonies is indeed determined for a large part by how long and how well they were governed. This can be seen especially in the presence (or lack thereof) of true civil society (not imported neo-colonial NGOs), the building block of democracy. South American states continued and some continue to pursue Spanish colonial exploitation, Haiti's long independence has not been especially beneficial to its population. Countries that were never colonized, such as China have no real democratic institutions. The real question is do human rights apply to all humans, are the values of the Enlightenment really Eurocentric? Are cultures fixed and static categories; that most be preserved regardless of human cost (as has been noted by Marxists

scholars such as [Vivek Chibber](#))?

Indeed, one of the problems with postcolonial theory, critical or other, is that it negates the foundations of reason, reverses cause and effect and denies Ockham's razor. Thus, before we judge too harshly, it should be asked how European colonialism came to be and what was the situation beforehand (Europeans didn't introduce e.g., slavery or human sacrifice), and what would have been the alternative in a modernizing world that was becoming more interconnected? Did not the British Empire with some degree of success prevent large scale pillage and exploitation (often fending off American economic exploitation)? It is however easier to judge a theorized past than to learn from our past successes and failures based on empirical evidence. Gilley noted in his 2017 article about European colonialism "both objectively beneficial and subjectively legitimate in most of the places where it was found" — words to bear in mind, especially now, when the former colonies, the so-called Third World is subject to an orchestrated hostile takeover, by imperious, iron-fisted Chinese debt colonization. Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the despotic threats made to Taiwan and islands in the South China Sea do much to put the British Empire in a proper historical perspective.

Professor Dr. Robert M. [Kerr](#) studied Classics and Semitics largely in Vancouver, Tübingen and Leyden. He is currently director of the [Inârah Institute](#), for research on Early Islamic History and the Qur'an in Saarbrücken (Germany).

[Featured image](#): "Britannia Rules the Waves," by Nicholas Habbe, painted in 1876.

