

**Title—*Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century***

**Author—David Reynolds**

**Year—1991**

Categories: Decolonization, British Empire, Politics

Place: British Empire

Time: 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Argument Synopsis:

Reynold's *Britannia Overruled* is concerned with the decline and dissolution of the British Empire during the first half of the twentieth century. One of the biggest shifts of the twentieth century was Britain's fall from world power status to a secondary player in the European community. Reynolds is concerned with the hundred-year period beginning in the 1890s and traces this century of British imperial history. Instead of the dominant approach dissecting Britain's domestic politics and culture, Reynolds utilizes an interdisciplinary approach drawing on economic and diplomatic history, political science, and policy studies. He makes explicit connections to the existing literature, setting his book apart from histories of British decline that are less broad in scope. His understanding of British decline is founded on a distinctive understanding of power itself—Reynolds sees power as relational as opposed to a tangible 'thing' (such as possession of land).

Reynolds begins by attempting to explain the reasons for British superiority at the beginning of the twentieth century. He argues that the British benefited from a head start in industrializing, as well as political forces in continental Europe. The British were able to use their naval advantage to maximize both their trade and their empire, while simultaneously hiding their own deficiencies. According to Reynolds, the British suffered from an under-industrialized economy, overdependence on exports, and had fewer material resources when compared with Russia and the United States. Essentially, Reynolds views British decline as inevitable once Europe and other states began challenging it. British position as an island, once a great military strength, was nullified by the invention of air power and missiles. The rise of German power on the continent and the increasing economic competition with the United States and Germany exposed the fragile underpinnings of British power, and ultimately overtaxed its dwindling share of economic resources. Reynolds criticizes British efforts to cling to their empire in the years after the second World War. He demonstrates how the state launched a huge initiative of global commitments after the war; misjudging their position in the postwar world.

The first few chapters provide assessments of British power and policy in the twentieth century and their overarching importance to a set of crucial sub-considerations such as wealth, rivals, and influences from other governments. He also covers the impact of the two world wars and the interwar period on Britain's economic, diplomatic, social, and strategic circumstances. Reynolds claims that Britain's commitment to Commonwealth ties over that of the European community hurt them significantly in the long run.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Britain's descent was not strictly linear—more accurately decline, revival, and fall
- British decline must not be seen as caused by single economic determinism, wealth as a subset of power was not the driving force for the decline
- The idea that great power status depends on a balance of economic and military resources is rigidly deterministic