

**Title—Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World**  
**Author—Niall Ferguson**  
**Year—2004**

Categories: British Empire, Colonialism, Economic, Culture

Place: British Empire/The World

Time: 1750-1980

Argument Synopsis:

Ferguson's *Empire* attempts to tell the history of the world's 'greatest' empire within six chapters. The first chapter emphasizes how the British Empire's growth was powered by commerce and consumerism. He argues that the rise of the British Empire was, in part, due to the growing need within Britain for sugar and tobacco. The second chapter describes how the pursuit of religious freedom, political liberty, and profit (as well as expelling criminals) spurred a migration the likes of which have not been seen since. He describes these mass migrations of Britons across the empire as indispensable for the foundation of the empire—these migrations “turned whole continents white.” The third chapter examines the belief that it was desirable that indigenous cultures should be Anglicized. He claims that Anglicization was a crucial step in bringing modernity to the world. The fourth chapter asks how it was possible for relatively small bureaucracies to govern the outposts of such a large empire. In this chapter, he specifically discusses the ability of a few thousand Britons to rule over the whole of India. The fifth chapter explores the interaction of financial institutions and the armaments race between European powers in the period of the scramble for Africa. Ferguson highlights the Maxim gun, calling it the secret weapon of the British. The gun was able to fire 500 rounds a minute, making it fifty times faster than the other rifles available during this period. He argues that the key to the rapid expansion in this period was a combination of firepower and financial power. The sixth chapter considers the challenge posed by rival empires in the twentieth century and how meeting those challenges led to the demise of the British Empire.

Overall, he accepts that the violence of the British Empire was an acceptable price to pay to herald in the modern era. In doing so, Ferguson accentuates the positives while placing little emphasis on the negatives. His content and argument lacks any measure of objectivity, and he presents a dangerous argument that justifies colonialism and imperialism, leaving the door open for the past to be repeated again in the future. He seems to bend over backwards in making his conclusion of the overall benefit of the Empire. In his discussion of the disastrous Boer concentration camps set up by the British during the South War of 1900-1902, he acknowledges that the camps killed almost 15% of the population, mostly children, through malnourishment and poor sanitation. And yet he ardently claims that these camps were not deliberately genocidal, but rather the result of a lack of foresight and incompetence. This is merely an example of the leaps of logic made by Ferguson throughout the book. Another note is that Ferguson himself is a bit of a celebrity historian, and this book was turned into a TV series. His plans of developing a TV special are evident in the style of writing.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The benefits of the British Empire outweighed the costs, making it a net good thing
- British Empire is responsible for the rule of law, free trade, and humanism of the modern world
- At its height, the British Empire brought to the half a billion under their rule a benign system of governance with remarkably non-venal administrations