

**Title—Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830**

**Author—C.A. Bayly**

**Year—1989**

Categories: British Empire, Colonialism, Imperialism, World History

Place: British Empire

Time: 1780-1830

Argument Synopsis:

Bayly sets out to review and revise the traditional Western historiography which has tended to view the expansion of Europe, and especially Britain, from 1780 to 1830 in terms of a newly liberal and industrialized West achieving almost casual dominance over the East. Bayly provides an explanatory framework for the extension of British rule during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in an attempt to develop an adequate theory of imperialism. His framework is global, and looks beyond nation-state boundaries in a novel way for the time of publication. Bayly emphasizes the way internal tension and conflict in Asia intersected with European aggression and expansion. The book takes aspects of both the very general macro-approaches of world system theorists and the culturalist attention to ‘thick descriptions’ of micro-events.

He argues against the dominant narrative that ignores the role of Asia in the expansion of the British Empire in the early nineteenth century. In order to do so, he provides a comprehensive overview of the character of the great Muslim land empires in their seventeenth century heyday before turning to a review of the forces that significantly weakened them by the mid-eighteenth century. These societies had declined but there was nothing irremediable in their decline, even if the larger imperial units were beyond repair. Bayly claims that it was more just unfortunate timing that the British were at their most aggressive at the moment of their greatest weakness. Bayly’s book breaks down some prominent themes in the dominant historiography regarding the ‘Second British Empire.’ There is a tendency to frame the expansion of the empire during this period as a result of economic or political liberalism. Bayly counters this by arguing that for the most part empire-building was very deliberate, and only made possible because of the huge improvement in the efficiency of the British state and its commitment to fighting France anywhere and at whatever cost. Empire expansion was the product of warfare and the greed and ambition of public servants and private interests—very seldom the result of economic or political liberalism.

In terms of organization, Bayly spends the first two chapters broadly describing the structures and crises of the early modern Muslim empire before turning to focus more specifically on the British Empire. The second half of the book is devoted to an analysis of the British empire in the early decades of the nineteenth century. State and state-building, with a strong military emphasis, is a central piece of Bayly’s theoretical scaffolding; he strives to include economy, society, religion, and symbols and ideologies of power. His book makes connections between issues that used to be considered separate from each other.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- There was nothing particularly new and nothing liberal about the British’s territorial expansion or the way in which they ran new possessions before 1830
- Growth of the British state was a crucial factor and that expansion was powered by the reaction of the state and its military apparatus to external challenges and internal revolt
- The old distinction between periphery-based and metropolitan-based explanations of imperial expansion are meaningless