

Title—The British Seaborne Empire
Author—Jeremy Black
Year—2004

Categories: Empire, Colonialism, Military, Britain

Place: British Empire

Time: 6500BCE-2004

Argument Synopsis:

Black's book seeks to better understand the seaborne aspect of empire in order to better understand the way empire was understood by Britons at the time. Black examines the seaborne empire beginning with the breaking of the land bridge to Europe in 6500 BCE and concludes in the present. Although this temporal scope is incredibly wide, the detailed focus of the book is on the period from 1707 to the present. His central argument is that the sea and naval power were central to Britain's rise in global dominance. He crafts a diplomatic and military history of British foreign policy and is most concerned with European power struggles as with the processes of empire. The book is organized into ten broadly chronological chapters, with each chapter focuses on a different topic. His chronological account of the empire begins with a chapter on the origins of empire generally, before turning to a more concerted focus on the British experience.

Black traces the British empire's rise and its decline throughout the period of 1707 to the present, with a concerted focus on the maritime aspect of that story. He emphasizes the complexity of British maritime bases and the distinctive differences when compared to other types of imperial powers. He argues that the British Empire was the power that gave indirect rise to America and was America's immediate predecessor as a global superpower. This linkage underscores the connections between consecutive global powers. He attempts to link maritime exploration, trade, migration, and naval affairs. Black fails to bring in any people in his analysis, for example trade is discussed in abstract terms without any discussion of the role of merchants and their networks in the creation of the British Empire. He characterizes the British Empire as an empire of governments, wars, and impersonal forces. This book underscores the importance of the British Empire's maritime nature in its distinctive contribution to the development of the modern world. Black's aim is to emphasize the centrality of sea and naval power to the British imperial experience.

Black is concerned with the geographical structure of the empire, and the ways that sea power shaped and influenced this structure. According to Black, "sea power made the empire what it was: without sea power there would have been no empire, or at least no empire in the form it actually took." (x) Black crafts an imperial narrative filled with wars, ships, and trades. He provides an immense coverage of the British Empire, including political, military, economic, social, demographic, and cultural history. He argues that the only constant theme of the British Empire is change—there is no central narrative to the empire. The book is a comprehensive study, but it lacks any human actors.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Sea and naval power were central to Britain's rise in dominance
- British empire was the power that gave indirect rise to America and was America's immediate predecessor as a global superpower
- No central narrative to the British Empire, the only constant theme is that of change