

**Title—The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997**

**Author—Piers Brendon**

**Year—2008**

Categories: Decolonization, Empire, Politics, Colonialism

Place: British Empire

Time: 1781-1997

Argument Synopsis:

Brendon's book is a general survey of the history of the modern British Empire. He argues that even during the period of British imperial expansion, the empire contained the seeds of its own destruction. He begins his study by analyzing the Battle of Yorktown, characterizing it as the first successful rebellion of colonial subjects against a sovereign power in modern history. Brendon highlights how there would be many Yorktowns for the British over the following two centuries. A note that Brendon relies mostly on published sources, as opposed to original archival research.

Brendon emphasizes his belief that the British Empire was fated to fail. He argues this especially in light of Britain's self-professed mission to hold its overseas possessions in trust for their indigenous inhabitants. This mission led to expectations that could only be fulfilled in the eventual dissolution of the empire. Essentially, Brendon identifies the rhetoric of the civilizing mission as sowing the seeds of the empire's own destruction. If the justification for colonial rule was that these peoples were not yet civilized enough to rule themselves, what happens when these colonies become 'civilized'? British world power was doomed from the very beginning because the colonial administrators held out the possibility of independence but then forced the colonies to fight or bargain to achieve this goal. His book emphasizes the contradictory nature of the claim that British power was exercised in and normally against the colonies for the purpose of serving their people's best interests. Brendon spends time discussing the state-sponsored violence that was involved in the acquisition and retention of such a large empire.

Brendon's work is unique among literature on the dissolution of Britain's empire by strongly recognizing the importance of Ireland in any account of the fall of the British Empire. Not only did a host of imitators of Irish nationalist movements spring up across the empire, even as far as Burma—British policy makers also had a growing recognition that the methods that had failed to maintain Britain's oldest colony in subjection (Ireland) were unlikely to succeed in those colonies more recently acquired.

The book traces the history of the empire from its loss of the American colonies up through the handover of Hong Kong in the 1990s. Brendon examines the contradictory nature of the British Empire's principles and actions. He claims that the empire was all too willing to expand beyond its means and stifle attempts at independence in order to retain its own global superiority—Brendon argues that this process only hastened its own downfall.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Even during the era of Britain's imperial expansion, the empire contained the seeds of its own destruction
- Empire was not created because of any cultural superiority of the British, but because of the royal navy and the economic advantage of early industrialization
- The importance of Ireland in the British Empire's dissolution