

**Title—Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain**

**Author—John Darwin**

**Year—2013**

Categories: Empire, Colonialism, Settler, Politics

Place: British Empire

Time: 1700-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Darwin's book is focused on the rise and the fall of the British Empire. The main theme of the book is the history of British expansion as a series of imperial encounters that started with contact and ended with the emergence of colonial societies. The book is divided into thematic chapters, which cover a variety of topics including the roles of commerce, rebellion, and religion. Darwin begins with the medieval origins of empire and concludes with a discussion of the empire's dissolution. Darwin argues against the characterization of the empire as a monolith—he claims that the empire was always unfinished, and it lacked political cohesion and a guiding ideological rationale. The empire was composed of hybrid components, conflicting traditions, and unsettled boundaries. British imperial success hinged on the political equilibrium created by the concert of a lack of serious competition in Asia, an introverted United States, and an Islamic world in disarray. The breakdown of this set of circumstances in the mid-twentieth century led to the downfall and dissolution of the empire.

Darwin underscores how most of the modern world is the relic of empires. He reveals the pre-decolonization belief that the British Empire had a self-correcting device: a liberal constitution through which political power answered to enlightened opinion. Darwin argues that the underlying assumption of much of the current work on the empire is that empires are abnormal, a monstrous intrusion in a usually empire-free world—he criticizes this assumption for being inherently Eurocentric. Darwin claims there is a need for an imperial history that pays close attention to the terms and conditions on which British interests and influence entered a particular region in search of trade or dominion.

Darwin accepts the formative argument of Robinson and Gallagher, arguing that their argument remains the point of departure for much work on the history of empire. Darwin moves beyond it by placing more emphasis on the conflicting interests circulating in the metropole. He argues that the idea of empire in Britain was an amalgam of territorial ambition, administrative practice, legal procedure, and cultural pretensions. The loss of the American colonies was the prelude to a colossal expansion of its scale and ambition. Darwin highlights the multifaceted nature of the British empire, with three distinct visions of the empire existing simultaneously by the nineteenth century. The empire of conquest, most represented by India, for which a new ideology of enlightened reform and disinterested trusteeship was being gradually fashioned. The settler empire was most represented by the dominions, especially Canada, New Zealand, and Canada. The empire of free trade was understood as an empire where rule was, or should be, redundant. Darwin emphasizes this unfinished nature of the British Empire.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- By the early nineteenth century, the British has three different visions of empire: the empire of conquest, the settler empire, and the empire of free trade
- The empire was not a monolith but was composed to hybrid components
- British Empire was mainly the product of private enterprise, not state power