



GRESHAM COLLEGE  
*Founded 1597*

# **Ten Cities that Built an Empire: Understanding British Imperialism Through the Urban Past Transcript**

Date: Wednesday, 5 October 2016 - 6:00PM

Location: Museum of London

5 October 2016

## **Ten Cities that Built an Empire: Understanding British Imperialism through the Urban Past**

Tristram Hunt MP

On the 30 June 1997, after the ninety-nine year lease on the New Territories came to an end, Great Britain handed back Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China.

At the stroke of midnight the Union Jack was lowered to the strains of 'God Save the Queen,' the Hong Kong police ripped the royal insignia from their uniforms, and Red Army troops poured over the border.

Steaming out of Victoria Harbour, as the Royal Marines played 'Rule Britannia' and 'Land of Hope and Glory', on the last, symbolic voyage of the Royal Yacht *Britannia*, Britain's last governor, former Conservative Party chairman Chris Patten, wrote 'that night we were leaving one of the greatest cities in the world, a Chinese city that was now part of China, a colony now returned to its mighty motherland in rather different shape to that in which it had become Britain's responsibility a century and a half before.'

In London, the atmosphere was altogether shriller. 'The handover of Hong Kong to China strikes many westerners as a disgrace and a tragedy,' thundered the *Economist*. 'Never before has Britain passed a colony directly to a Communist regime that does not even pretend to respect conventional democratic values.'

The diaries of Alastair Campbell, Prime Minister Tony Blair's director of communications, describe the scene amongst the UK delegation preparing for the ceremonial. 'When someone referred to the Chinese as the "Dewhursts of Peking" there was a mild laugh around the table. I looked at Chris Patten a bit bemused. "Dewhursts as in butchers," he said.'

Campbell thought it all a little self-indulgent, but when he caught site of the goose-stepping Chinese soldiers, he was hit by 'the full awfulness' of the handover. 'Then the flag came down, and theirs went up and it was all pretty sick. Tony Blair hated it and it showed a little ... I can't believe that we could not have kept it.'

In his own memoirs, Blair recalls of the ceremony 'a tug, not of regret but of nostalgia for the old British Empire.' He also admits to a startling failure to appreciate the historic significance of the return of Hong Kong as a rising, newly prosperous China sought to take its place in the world and shed the memory of its 'century of humiliation' at the hands of British, French and American forces.

However, there was one member of the British delegation keener to cling on to the past. In a confidential diary entry entitled, 'The Great Chinese Takeaway,' His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales laid bare his despair at seeing the Crown colony returned to the mainland.

Watching another piece fall from his family inheritance, the Prince lamented the 'ridiculous rigmarole' of meeting the 'old waxwork' Jiang Zemin, and the horror of watching an 'awful Soviet-style' ceremony in which 'Chinese soldiers goose-step on to the stage and haul down the Union Jack.'

So heartening Prince of Wales doesn't make these gaffes now...

Charles Philip Arthur George Mountbatten-Windsor knew all too well that when his time came to assume the throne the loss of Hong Kong meant Britain's imperial role would be long past. 'Such is the end of Empire, I sighed to myself.'

But if the British Empire has indeed come to an end, its legacies remain nonetheless apparent all around the world - and the most compelling of those phenomena still with us is the chain of former colonial cities dotted across the globe - from Dublin to Mumbai, Melbourne to New Delhi.

After sporting pastimes and the English language (to which might be added Anglicanism, the Parliamentary system, and Common Law), urbanism is arguably 'the most lasting of the British imperial legacies.'

And this imperial heritage is now being preserved and restored at a remarkable rate as postcolonial nation's debate the virtues and vices, the legacies and burdens of the British past and how they should relate to it today.

So my new book seeks to explore that imperial story through the urban form: ten cities charting the rise and fall of the British Empire. It charts the changing character of British imperialism through the architecture and civic institutions, the street names and fortifications, the material culture and ritual.

The history of these cities also exposes how understandings of imperialism changed across time and space. At times Britain was a mercantilist empire, at other times a free-trading empire; in certain periods, Great Britain was involved in a process of promoting Western civilization, at others in protecting multi-cultural relativism.

As Joseph Conrad's Marlow acerbically notes in *Heart of Darkness*, it was an **idea** that had to redeem the practice of empire at any particular point. 'An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence, but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...'

The ambition of the book was to explain how those ideologies of Empire were made flesh through the city – and, in the process, move the debate about our imperial past on from some of the narrow, binary definitions it has laboured under for the last decade or so.

Famously, in his 2003 book *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, the historian Niall Ferguson made a stirring and influential case for the British Empire as the handmaiden of globalisation and force for progress. 'No organization has done more to promote the free movement of goods, capital and labour than the British Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,' he wrote.

By way of contrast, an increasing body of opinion has sought to cast British imperialism as a very bad thing. In the words of the left-wing author Richard Gott, 'the rulers of the British empire will one day be perceived to rank with the dictators of the twentieth century as the authors of crimes against humanity on an infamous scale.'

And much of Gott's case has received official endorsement in recent years with a series of public acknowledgements by European governments of colonial crimes. In 2004, Germany apologised for the massacre of 65,000 Herero peoples in what is now Namibia; in 2008 Italy announced it was to pay reparations to Libya for injustices committed during its thirty-year rule of the north African state.

Then, in 2013, the United Kingdom government (having apologised for the Great Famine of 1845-52 and expressed official regret over Britain's role in the Atlantic slave trade) was forced by a High Court judgement to announce a £20 million compensation package for 5,228 Kenyan victims of British abuse during the 1950s Kenya Emergency or Mau Mau Rebellion.

The danger now is that as the legacy of Empire moves into the realm of official apologies, law suits and compensation settlements, the space for detached, historical judgement has perceptibly narrowed. What is more, as Linda Colley has suggested, 'one of the reasons why we all need to stop approaching empire in simple "good" or "bad" thing terms, and instead think intelligently and enquiringly about its many and intrinsic paradoxes, is that versions of the phenomenon are still with us.'

And it is the very complexity of the *urban* past which allows us to go beyond the 'good' and 'bad' cul-de-sac of so much imperial debate. The history of colonialism covered in this study suggests a more diffuse process of exchange, interaction and adaptation. Which also shaped us as much as it shaped the world.

So, what does the history of these cities reveal?

## **Boston**

- My story begins on the Eastern seaboard of America, where in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century a band of Puritan merchants and settlers sought to craft a New England – far removed from the fallen, Catholic world of Stuart England. And they built a city, 'A City on a Hill,' as Governor Winthrop famously described it, and called it Boston after the town in Lincolnshire.
- This neck of land is not above four miles in compass; in form almost square, having on the south side, at one corner, a great broad hill, whereon is planted a fort, which can command any ship as she sails into any harbour.
- This was, in its beginnings, a godly citadel dedicated to true religion. But as the 1600s moved into the 1700s, this became an Empire of goods as much as God – as a vibrant trans-Atlantic commerce in cod, whale oil, silverware, tea, cotton, coffee and ceramics accelerated. The world of London, Manchester and Birmingham was part of the world of New York, Philadelphia and Boston. The plays, newspapers, music, novels and fashion were the same.
- There was a cultural Anglicanism across the pond. And it was built on a war economy which benefited all sides: as the British fought the French for control of the Caribbean and Canada, Boston benefited. But when the British Parliament asked the Thirteen Colonies to pay for their protection, things turned sour.
- Inevitably, being British, the fight came down to the price of a cup of tea: with the Bostonians keen on smuggling in the tea-leaves; and the British keen on taxing it.
- Right up until the Boston Tea-Party of 1773, the eastern seaports of America were amongst the most loyal, royal of colonies. But when the rhetoric of Empire changed from a shared sense of culture to resentment at foreign taxation and rule, the British Empire in America came to an end.

## **Bridgetown**

- What went with tea was sugar. And my second city of Empire is Bridgetown Barbados.
- The history of the British in the West Indies is a salutary and harsh reminder of the raw brutality,

oppression and racism involved in so much of the colonial project. The British became involved in sugar production from the late 1600s, using techniques developed by the Dutch and Brazilians. But they would never get the indigenous Amerindians to work the land. So, instead, between 1662-1807, British ships carried 3.25 million Africans across the Atlantic to America and the Caribbean.

- And in Barbados, they turned a land mass similar in size to the Isle of Wight into one of the richest islands in the world. 'The whole is a sweet Spot of Earth, not a Span hardly uncultivated with Sugar-Canes; all sides bend with an easy declivity to the Sea, and is ever green,' was what John Atkins, a surgeon in the Royal Navy, thought of the island. The island was almost entirely given over to cane, with some 93% of its total exports made up of sugar, rum, and molasses.
- And it was all exported out of Bridgetown.
- This was where the slaves came in and the sugar went out. And the profits from that bloody enterprise then flowed across the Atlantic to fund great stately homes, but also the origins of the Industrial Revolution and the growing might of the British Army and the Royal Navy.

## Dublin

- Ireland, of course, was England's earliest colony: from the plantations of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the English and the Scottish had settled its lands. And, as such, they became a part of the Irish nation. These settlers and their descendants - the so-called Protestant Ascendancy - turned the city of Dublin during the 18<sup>th</sup> century into a showcase of their civilization. As 'English-born-in-Ireland', they wanted to be equal partners in Empire, not troublesome colonial cousins.
- We don't always think of Dublin as an imperial city - but that is how they saw it in the 1960s, when nationalist politicians tried to knock most of it down: 'Georgian buildings are an offence to all true-blue Irishmen, they are a hangover from a repressive past ... and they must go.' Ripping balls swung through the terraces & squares.
- Architecture of Dublin was a testament to desire to build a sense of Britishness. Referendum. Secure identity before heading out to the world.
- Just look at the Customs House, designed by James Gandon: its theme was the 'Union of Empire' representing 'the friendly union of Britannia and Hibernia, with good consequences relating to Ireland.'
- 1801 Act of Union. On 15 February 1808: Nelson's column. At a meeting of the Dublin City Council on 7 December 1953, a letter was submitted from the Hon. Secretary, IRA Dublin Brigade, enclosing a copy of a resolution adopted by the Dublin Brigade Council calling for the removal of Nelson's Pillar. It was destroyed in 1966.

## Cape Town

- The capture and control of Cape Town was fundamental to growing the global power of the Royal Navy and, crucially, securing India for the British. This was the seaport and provisioning station for 'The Swing to the East.' Central to that was Cape Town - 'the brothel and tavern of the two oceans' or, more generously, 'the master link of connection between the western and eastern world.'
- Jemima Kinderlsey: 'everyone must be pleased with the town, which has all the regularity and neatness usual among the Dutch: the streets are all parallel to each other; and there is one large square with trees planted round, and a canal of water from springs running down: the houses are very good and have a neat appearance on the outside; which altogether make it a very pretty town and, some few circumstances excepted, equal in neatness to any of our sea-ports in England.'
- With its Table Mountain, cascading clouds and roaring seas, there was always a romance about Cape Town. But, initially, it was a Dutch colonial outpost rather than British. On the long journey from Holland to the East Indies, Cape Town emerged as a crucial victualling stop to ward off scurvy, buy fresh food and supply water. It was a city of beautiful vegetable gardens & elegant houses.
- But when the French invaded Holland during the 1790s, there suddenly came the prospect of France also capturing Cape Town. 'What was a feather in the hands of Holland, will become a sword in the hands of France.' To hold onto India a secure route around the Cape of Good Hope had become ever more vital: capture in early 1800s and beginning of British settlement: religious freedom, end to slavery, and, of course, hunting and horse-racing.

## Calcutta

- So what was the prize which Cape Town was so determined to protect? It was the riches and prosperity coming from the East India Company compounds in Bengal. Its capital and the capital of British India was Calcutta. 'Nothing could equal the magnificence of my approach to this town. For nearly three miles the river, which is as large as the Thames at London, is bordered by lovely well-built country houses with porticoes and colonnades. The town is a mass of suburb palaces in the same style, with the finest fortress in the world.'

- To Victorian imagination: Black Hole of Calcutta. BUT what Calcutta symbolised was both the riches (notably, silk & cotton) extracted from India by the Company – the great trading vehicle of British India – but also a grander, more territorial sense of Empire. In India this was an Empire of land as well as sea. The man who advocated that philosophy most aggressively was Richard Wellesley: he was determined for ‘India to be ruled from a palace, not from a counting-house.’ Building on the work of Lord Clive and Warren Hastings, Wellesley massively expanded British rule in India in the early 1800s and he wanted Calcutta to reflect such ambition.
- Just as the world was coming to appreciate Edward Gibbon’s meditation on the collapse of Roman civilization in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1772-1789), on the banks of the Hooghly Richard Wellesley was confidently inaugurating a new era of imperial might. Calcutta’s old Council House and ‘sixteen other handsome private mansions’ were ripped down for Wellesley’s palace. BUT not just colonial authoritarianism: Bengal Renaissance etc.

## Hong Kong

- One of the most successful exports out of Calcutta was opium. It ‘crept in a most mysterious and fascinating manner into the homes of the rich and poor, and with its mystic fingers gripped the hearts of old and young,’ reported one shamed British missionary. ‘Men became paralysed before this new force, and reason stood silent, and the highest ideals of human life slowly paled and vanished in the presence of this Indian mystery.’
- From the poppy fields of Bengal came a lucrative trade in this addictive drug. The most lucrative market for it was China. But Britain needed a trading post: and so the ‘Fragrant Harbour’ or ‘Hong Kong’ was settled.
- If Cape Town was about the sea, Calcutta about land, Hong Kong was about Britain’s informal empire of free trade. The Opium Wars and capture Hong Kong was carried out to open up the vast Chinese market to companies like Jardine Matheson. It was to be a free port on Chinese soil, which would introduce East Asia to open markets and British goods.
- Soon enough, it became one of the busiest shipping stations in the world as Chinese ocean-going junks bobbed up against heavy Indian merchantmen, American whalers, tea clippers, gigs, paddle-steamers and gunboats. By the end of the nineteenth century, when over 11,000 ships entered and cleared every year, carrying over 13 million tons of cargo, Hong Kong would proudly claim the title of the Empire’s third port after London and Liverpool.
- But there was also its beauty. It was the very drama of the location – the rain and sun, the valleys and forests, the deep greens and shearing rocks – which so entranced the first European visitors.

## Bombay

- By contrast, the next city began as the island of the good life and ended up as filthy and dirty an industrial city as Birmingham or Manchester.
- Jardine-Matheson’s Indian fixer was Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, who formed part of an elite of Parsi businessmen turning Bombay into a prosperous port city. BUT it was the American Civil War and the need for new cotton supplies into a booming metropolis. In the process, Bombay became the first industrial city of the British Empire and the setting for the display of British technological might. In its architecture, infrastructure, industry and civic pride, Bombay became ‘Urbs Prima in Indis.’
- It was always the case that a visiting Briton ‘feels himself a greater man for his first sight of Bombay.’
- In Bombay, the British joined with the Indian civic elite to build ports, docks, railroads, law courts, markets and museums. The merits of colonialism became aligned with modernity and technological progress through the architecture of ‘Bombay Gothic.’
- VT - ‘a vast domed mass of stone fretted with point and column and statuary and shrubbery, purple-belled creepers, scarlet-starred shrubs.’ Morris: ‘the truly central building of the entire British Empire – the building which expresses most properly the meaning of the imperial climax.’
- And much of that was down to our home grown architectural talent in the form of John Lockwood Kipling. Importance of students. ‘Indo-Saracenic’ designs. ‘Nature of Gothic.’

## Melbourne

- But in Melbourne a different architectural form took hold. Here the great contribution to imperial culture was the suburban house. ‘Nearly everybody who can live in the suburbs,’ explained Twopeny. ‘It is strange that the Australian townsman should have so thoroughly inherited the English love of living as far as possible away from the scene of his business and work during the day.’
- Shared architectural tastes spoke to the broader theme which Melbourne highlights: a belief in a ‘crimson thread of kinship.’ Shared, imperial identity: Melbourne and the colony of Victoria conceived of itself as part of a Greater Britain, whose blood loyalties flowed out from the British Isles all the way to the Bass Strait. In the urban centres of the ‘white colonies’ - South Africa, Canada and New Zealand, Australia - a conception of Empire as a partnership between an Anglo-Saxon tribe separated by oceans; connected by race.

- Part of that connection was created through sport. Growing cycle of cricket tours from the 1860s. Vehicle for exploration of Australian & British identity. 'For all that the sceptre has passed away so to speak, the flag is struck. It may console them to note that the English race is not degenerating, and that in the distant land and on turf where lately the blackfellow hurled his boomerang, a generation has arisen which can play the best bowlers of the time.'
- Language of sportsmanship segued into martial spirit of WWI:
- A team that is ready to take the field
- To bowling with balls of lead,
- In a test match grim, where if one appealed,
- The umpire might answer 'dead.'

## New Delhi

- 'The Rome of Hindustan lies on a scorched and windswept plain, historied with tumbledown memorials of the Mohammedan conquerors. Across this plain glitters now an English Delhi, a vision of domes and towers, pink and cream against the morning blue and new green trees below.' Even the great travel writer Robert Byron thought words could barely do justice to this virgin city: the monumentality of new Delhi had to be seen to be believed - 'dome, tower, dome, tower, dome, red, pink, cream, and white, washed gold and flashing in the morning sun. The traveller loses a breath, and with it his apprehensions and preconceptions. Here is something not merely worthy, but whose like has never been.'
- So, into Lutyens's designs crept the red sandstone of **Fatehpur Sikri** and the cream stone of **Agra**, the overhanging cornice to block the sun and monsoon rains (chujja); the Rajasthani latticed, marble window which admitted air but not sunshine (jali); and the miniature roof pavilion (chattri).

## Liverpool

'Liverpool was called into being ... as a junction for the landing, embarkation and storage of vast wealth exchanged between the North and Midlands of England and the overseas world.' The Mersey docks brought in the raw materials from West Africa, the West Indies and North America (timber, sugar, grain), and then shipped out finished wares, (Birmingham's metal goods, Staffordshire ceramics, Sheffield steel, to the world markets. Above all, it was the cotton industry that secured Liverpool's exponential growth.

To the ends of the earth. 'In olden times it used to be said that "all roads lead to Rome." Today all seas lead to Liverpool,' chimed the Liverpool historian WT Pike. 'There is no part of the globe, however remote, whose natives may not be met on the Liverpool landing stage, and there is no territory so distant whose products do not pass from time to time through the docks and warehouses of Liverpool and Birkenhead.'

Multicultural city: 'Unlike the dwellers in most English towns, all of us in Liverpool are, to a great extent, citizens of the world,' explained the Liverpool Critic of 1877, 'for everything around us tells us of far-off countries and foreign ways, and in our midst are constantly natives of so many distant lands that we insensibly imbibe and learn to practice peculiarities not British.'

No city more affected by the end of Empire. The move away from a British economy based around raw material production on the edges of Empire and manufacturing production at the core -with the import-export trade that all entailed - could only signal a killer-blow to the shipping, storage, insurance, finance, trading and general entrepot activities of Merseyside. The port of Liverpool had been made by Empire, and as decolonisation gathered pace, it was apparent the city would be unmade by the end of Empire, just as rapidly and messily as those final years of imperial retreat.

- Rapid & aggressive descent: nadir of July 1981 riots. Combination of factors, but have to be regarded within context of imperial retreat.
- But that is not where my story ends. Because across the former cities of the British Empire, one can trace the impact of the new rising powers. But one can also trace the end of Empire here in the UK.

So, finally, this book traces how the rise and fall of Empire has affected not only the history of former colonial cities - but also the story of our own urban past.

And nowhere more so than in Liverpool. For Liverpool's civic leaders have concluded regeneration lies with the remnimbi: the city has 'twinned' with Shanghai (whose celebrated pedestrian promontory, the Bund, was inspired by elements of the Liverpool Waterfront), despatched Everton Football Club on a series of 'soft-power' friendlies, spruced up its own 'China-town.'

Driving this Sino-Scouse collaboration is the Peel Group, which is hoping to revive the region's entrepot economy with its £10bn Liverpool Waters and Wirral Waters redevelopment scheme. It is now a different empire that the Port of Liverpool is servicing.

In a total reversal of Lancashire and Liverpool's old export economy, the plan is for Chinese imports to be delivered straight to the north-west of England, sailing down the Mersey and then transported along the Ship

Canal.

In 2010 the Wirral Society of local conservationists condemned those 'who are dead set on restructuring the riverside entrance into the port of Liverpool in the style of Sydney, New York or Shanghai.' In the diffident language of a regional conservation group, they suggested, 'it is very feasible that many Wirralians will not like the idea of being Shanghai'd.'

But new empires are rising - and their force will be felt in a new generation of imperial cities across the globe.

© Tristram Hunt MP, 2016