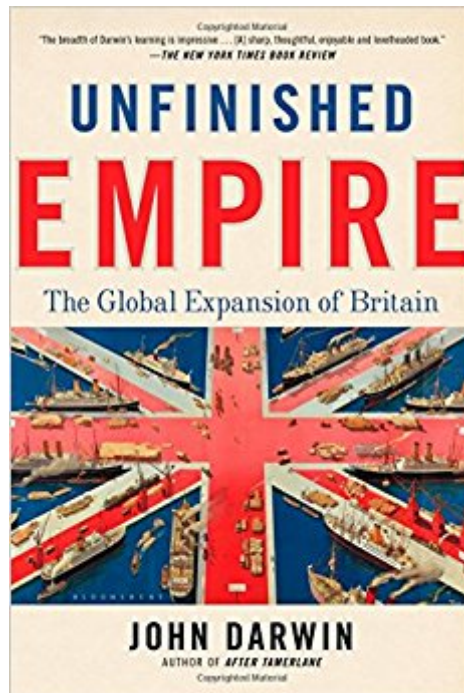




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# Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion Of Britain



## Synopsis

John Darwin's *After Tamerlane*, a sweeping six-hundred-year history of empires around the globe, marked him as a historian of "massive erudition" (the Guardian) and narrative mastery. In *Unfinished Empire*, he marshals his gifts to deliver a monumental one-volume history of Britain's imperium—a work that is sure to stand as the most authoritative and compelling treatment of the subject for a generation. It was hailed as one of the 10 best books of 2013 by Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post*. Darwin's penetrating analysis offers a corrective to those who portray the empire as either naked exploitation or a grand "civilizing mission." Far from ever having a "master plan," the British Empire was controlled by a range of interests often at loggerheads with one another and was as much driven on by others' weaknesses as by its own strength. *Unfinished Empire* is a remarkable, nuanced history of the most complex polity the world has ever known, and a serious attempt to describe the diverse, contradictory ways—military and cultural—in which empires really function.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Founded in a fit of absentmindedness, as the saying goes, the British Empire was never a monolithic polity but had different circumstances surrounding the establishment, growth, and rule of its colonies. Combine the variations in its parts and the range of historical opinion about it, from praise to condemnation, and one wonders whether a single-volume history of it is even possible. Darwin confidently forges one, however, that accentuates the decentralized character of the

centuries of its expansion, which proceeded in tension with the links of trade, law, and military power between an outpost and London. If imperial control varied from colony to colony, it waxed and waned in a general sequence everywhere. British contact with a foreign land was followed by growth of a colonial society, assertions of autonomy or rebellion, and eventual independence. To contemporaries at all times, the worth and justice of the empire provoked debate that Darwin quotes amid his accounts of empire building in America, Africa, India, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. Vast and controversial though his subject, Darwin raises all key historical issues in this solid survey of British imperialism. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

• The depth of Darwin's learning is impressive • [his] tone throughout is admirably detached and scholarly, though his dry wit keeps it well away from being boring • [a] sharp, thoughtful, enjoyable and levelheaded book. • The New York Times Book Review • Mr. Darwin's informative and intelligent book is ably written, and it is brimming with interesting statistics and acute observations. • The Wall Street Journal • [A] remarkable history of the empire • immensely important and useful. As an Englishman, Darwin declines to be either boastful or self-lacerating about the empire his country presided over, but simply examines it with a clear eye. This he has achieved to a laudable and indeed remarkable degree. • Jonathan Yardley, The Washington Post • A brilliantly perceptive analysis of the forces and ideas that drove the creation of an extraordinary enterprise • Bringing together his huge erudition, scrupulous fairness and elegant prose, Mr Darwin has produced a wonderfully stimulating account of something that today seems almost incredibly yet was, in historical terms, only yesterday. • Economist

John Darwin titled his masterly history *Unfinished Empire* to emphasize the haphazard process by which Great Britain came to possess a huge imperium. I chose to title my review *The Accidental Empire* because after reading it through it seemed to me that at times the British came into possession of their empire through incident and happenstance rather than any master plan or organization. *Unfinished Empire* is an erudite but very accessible and entertaining work. Rather than attempting a purely chronological approach (which would have probably required several volumes to complete) Darwin chose a more comparative approach in which he analyzed the processes of contacting, taking possession of, and settling new areas of territory. He then moved on to the details of how the different colonies were governed, protected, forced into submission or eventually allowed to regain independence, and made part of a growing international economy. This approach works well, although Americans will find the less prominent place it allows the sections dealing with the

thirteen Atlantic colonies and the American Revolution somewhat surprising. Throughout the book Darwin emphasizes that the British never went after an empire in the way the French, Spanish, and Portuguese did: as an organized and centrally directed enterprise. Instead, Britain's pluralistic society, growing economy based on private enterprise, early industrialization, and control of trade routes and shipping all combined with a world power vacuum in the 18th and 19th centuries to create an empire. Once the British had power in a region like India they were determined to keep control of it, using their superior armed forces and weaponry and skillfully working to co-opt any possible areas of resistance. There are many fascinating stories in *Unfinished Empire*: the details by which the British East India Company managed to weaken and replace the Mughals in India, or the process by which China was forced to open itself up to British trade, or the devious efforts of men like Cecil Rhodes to establish themselves in Africa and Asia, becoming personally wealthy and making their motherland's empire even larger. Just as fascinating are the stories of how the British Empire came to an end in the twentieth century as a result of catastrophic world war and economic exhaustion. Unlike some historians of Empire Darwin gives plenty of attention to the indigenous peoples who came under British domination and either suffered for it (like most Indians and Africans) or managed to maintain some independence and cultural autonomy (most notably the Maoris of New Zealand.) *Unfinished Empire* is a balanced work which both the British and their former subject peoples can enjoy. It is highly scholarly and scrupulously referenced, but it is also a lively and entertaining read that does much to explain how a small island off the northwestern shores of Europe became a world power, and how the consequences of that accomplishment still affects the world today.

A balanced assessment of the actual motivations and events, without the burden of encyclopedic detail and yet with an adequate range of stories and analyses from every quadrant of the empire. An entertaining style of writing. No unnecessary verbiage whatsoever. An unbiased perspective. Novel explanations that should alter perceptions into the distant future. The only possible flaw is the title, which seems to have been chosen to provoke curiosity. Then again, hopefully it will succeed in baiting readers, because this author is as reliably anchored as Gibraltar, and he is inviting the rest of us to see things differently.

A good thematic history. John Darwin is a fine historian who is also a good writer. Reading this book one gets the big picture warts and all of the British Empire. The discussions of Iain Mcleod and Macmillan's decolonization efforts are well put. This book would suffice for a broad survey course on

the British Empire. That a small island nation could effectively rule over much of the world is a remarkable feat of technology and innovation. I also like the fact that Darwin isn't needlessly apologizing for the Empire, he states the facts and does so with appropriate scholarship. I recommend its purchase for those who want to learn about the Empire and Commonwealth.

This is an interesting, if somewhat arguable, work that attempts to explore the social and political interactions that colored British colonization activities from the American Colonies to India to Africa to Oceania. The interactions between the home government in England and the Anglo-european colonists, native inhabitants and the often violent or extra-legal actions of the various parties is explored. The author attempts to analyze and explain these actions and how it shaped the various components of this disharmonious collection known as the British Empire. As an American (of a number of ethnic threads) I naturally have my own biases but found this to be an interesting read ... especially in the description of the Australian and New Zealand colonial periods. I did not perceive, however, that much of this interaction which seems to be universal in human civilization, especially the disconnect between ethnic colonist and Imperial interests, was described in these terms. There was little compare and contrasts with other Imperial states. Overall a worthwhile read on Kindle.

John Darwin has accomplished a scholarly feat of immense scope. This is a book I have always wanted to read but had not yet found until now. This is a real global history for two hundred years. How were the political events in Europe affecting Chinese political and social development? How did the French-British rivalry for most of this period influence the developing trade routes to the Middle East and south Asia? How did the East India Company change the fundamentals of British imperialism? Histories of this period have tended to have a focus on national developments and influences rather than the inter-connections in global and regional developments. A challenging and fascinating read.

A lot of study and conjecture went into this book. John Darwin was correct in starting the empire with Ireland and France. The book was somewhat verbose in that the author over killed my patience by including what I considered unwanted details. Otherwise I liked what was said. Placing the defeats of early WW II for GB as the final blow to the Empire was explained.

I had to buy this book for a Western Civ college course. I thought it might be really dry but it turned out to be well written, understandable, interesting, and very helpful. I bought the audio version, and

that was really helpful. For a book about the British Empire, I would recommend it for both formal and personal education.

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