

After Tamarlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires 1400-2000

John Darwin (2008) 'AFTER TAMARLANE: THE RISE AND FALL OF GLOBAL EMPIRES 1400-2000', Penguin UK, 1 April 2008, 592 p

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ABSTRACT

"Tamerlane, the Ottomans, the Mughals, the Manchus, the British, the Japanese, the Nazis, and the Soviets: All built empires meant to last forever; all were to fail. But, as John Darwin shows in this magisterial book, their empire-building created the world we know today.

From the death of Tamerlane in 1405, to America's growing imperial presence to the resurgence of China and India as global economic powers; 'After Tamarlane' is a wonderfully intriguing perspective on the past, present and future of empires."

1. Introduction

Book blurbs often exaggerate, in an attempt to entice a reluctant, undecided reader to buy or read a book. This one, from the Penguin edition of the book 'After Tamarlane – The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400-2000', is not way off the mark in its praise while managing to capture some essential message of the book. The book, of course, has many more spectacular insights.

John Darwin, in his convincing and fascinating book, basically argues that in world history empires have been the rule, not the exception. He considers the economic, political and cultural impact of globalization on history writing and explains that understanding the course, nature, scale and limits of Europe's expansion from sixteenth century onwards (the rise of the West) can only be understood when one looks at the history not from narrow European perspective, as most history books are prone to do, but from a much expanded perspective of Eurasia, and indeed, the world. Further, one must expand the scope of analysis to include the complex interplay of politics, religion, culture, economy, geography and technology.

2. The Review

The book explores three fundamental themes. The first is global connectedness, commonly understood as globalisation. This is about interdependency of different countries on each other for trade and commerce, jobs, immigration, politics, and intermixing of cultures. The second theme is the rise of Europe specifically from sixteenth century onwards and later the rise of Far West (or US) through the means of empire, and the role played by it in defining global history. The third theme is the resilience shown by many of Eurasia's other states and cultures in the face of Europe's expansion. Each of these factors has played a role in shaping the world as we know it, a kind of

semi unified system of world politics and culture from which no state or culture or economy has remained unaffected.

Darwin regards empires as systems of influence or rules in which ethnic, cultural or ecological, boundaries are diffused, overlapped or get ignored. Imperialism is defined as the attempt to impose one's state of predominance over other societies by assimilating them into one's political, cultural and economic systems.

"In the autumn of 1399, Tamerlane embarked on what would be his last campaign. Just a few months earlier he had returned to Samarkand, flush with spoils from his recent sack of Delhi. Now - while the elephants he had brought from India were put to work, hauling stone for a spectacular new mosque - he marched southwest to fight the Ottoman sultan. He laid waste to the Near East in the gruesome style for which he would become notorious: in Baghdad, his soldiers stacked up the heads of 90,000 victims in 120 towers around the city."

At the time of his death his Timurid Empire controlled practically all of Central and West Asia, parts of India, and large swathes of North Africa and Europe. But this book is not about him or his empire. This book is about what came after him and the lessons we learn about empire building. It is also about how empire building evolved over the last five to six hundred years, while providing a lesson to the reader on the historical processes; the ever evolving linkages of military leaders and power, economy, culture and technology; which were at work behind empire building.

The death of Tamarlane in 1405 was a turning point in world history. Tamarlane was the last of the series of world-conquerors in the tradition of Attila and Genghis Khan, who strove to bring the whole of Eurasia under the rule of a

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single vast empire. Robert Kaplan, in another notable book 'Revenge of Geography', writes, thus, about rise of these warrior kings, "Mongol-Turkic invasions were arguably the most significant event in world history in the second millennium C.E., and it was mainly because of the use of certain animals tied to geography." From the horses, skillful archers and grasslands of Central Asian steppes, soon the history of the world was to be reshaped by maritime explorers and navigators originating in Europe.

Within fifty years of his death, the maritime states of West Europe led by Portugal and Spain were exploring the sea routes ('Age of Discovery' as historians later named it) for the purposes of trade that eventually became the nerves and arteries of the European maritime empires. By sixteenth century, vast land mass from Portugal to China had splintered into three different zones: Europe, "Islamic Middle Eurasia" and East Asia. The discovery of the sea as a preferred transport medium transformed trade, diplomacy, warfare and culture. It also reconfigured empires. In the centuries that followed, European states built empires more wide-ranging than Tamerlane could have imagined, energised by capitalism, new technologies and ideologies. The intercontinental networks they forged laid the foundations for today's "globalised" world.

The Eurasian Empire building race began in sixteenth century, led by the British who at their zenith ruled one fourth of the world population, controlled 35 million sq. kms or one fourth of the earth, and extended so far from East to West that the phrase 'The Empire on which the sun never sets' came to define it. The French were not too far behind, with control of large parts of West and North Africa, Indochina and regions like Madagascar, Mauritius and several southern parts of North America. Spain and Portugal colonised mainly the 'New World' or South American continent. Portugal had a good presence in Africa as well: Angola, Mozambique and Equatorial Guinea.

Much of the book is devoted to the rise of the West over the last half a millenia and Darwin lays bare many reasons and assumptions attributed to this seemingly effortless rise. He examines why and how the Europeans were able to achieve global dominance; or was it really as effortless as is commonly believed. He analyses deftly the economic, geopolitical, and cultural legacies and systems and trends that had come to arise during this particular period, and how Imperial Europe was often not as dominant, or as sure as is commonly believed. He traces the progress of European imperialism and supremacy and emphasizes that it wasn't a set of linear events but at best had several false starts, had usual impediments, occasional spectacular victories, and many many fortuitous developments. Also several of Eastern Asia (China and Japan) - proved far more resistant and impervious to

European domination and penetration than is commonly believed. In another rebuttal to commonly held belief, Darwin correctly points out that the West's rise cannot be explained by simply referring to industrialisation alone. "The Eurasian revolution was in fact three revolutions: in geopolitics, in culture and in economics." To further strengthen his argument, he points out that Britain only became a steel and coal based economy by the 1850s, at a time when it had already built a substantial political and economic empire.

It would also be fallacious to think that empire building remained a western European endeavour or once European empires strengthened, other empires simply withered away.

Ottoman, the Islamic empire, with Istanbul as its capital, lasted from 1299 to 1923. At the height of its power (16th-17th centuries), the empire spanned three continents and controlled much of Western Asia, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the Caucasus, and North Africa. After the empire was considerably weakened by internal corruption and unrest, inept rulers and loss of territory in the West, Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 effectively carved the remnants of this empire in the areas of British and French influence.

Romanovs ruled large landmass of Russia, also Baltics and East Europe sporadically for three hundred years from 1613 to 1918, when the turbulence in the wake of First World War and Bolshevism under Lenin swept away last Tsar Nicholas II and brought his entire family to a violent end.

Japan pursued its own empire building ambitions. By the end of 19th century it controlled Korean peninsula. Its longstanding conflicts with China came to a head with annexation of Manchuria. The First World War had weakened European empires considerably and by 1937-38, Japan had escalated the war to most of the Chinese coast which resulted in massive loss of lives of Chinese soldiers and civilians alike. Japan also had control of Malay region, Burma and was threatening British Empire in India till it was pushed back.

India itself under the Mughals went through considerable economic progress and territorial expansion for two hundred years till the early eighteenth century, commanding one time a quarter of the world's GDP.

This history of the globe since 1400 is not only the story of the rise of the West, but also the story of the resilience of Eurasia to a uniform system. After the ravages of the second world war, especially Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nations quickly went about rebuilding. Japan, followed by Korea and then China and recently India, have demonstrated that resilience by building world class economies from the ruins of wars (or colonisation). At least in the case of China, it can be said to be laying out new

rules of modernisation and mercantilist empire building. It has managed to fill the void left by USSR which as an empire had collapsed in a chain of events after its misadventures in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Darwin is at his best while putting his observations and analysis to tell the story of the collapse of USSR and the rise of the US in recent times. On the fall of the Soviet Union: "In less than half a decade this vast imperial structure – the ruling power across Northern Eurasia; the tenacious rival in Southern Asia, Africa and the Middle East – simply fell to pieces. By 1991 it was an empire in ruins. There was no 'silver age' or phase of decline: just a calamitous fall". Of course, he goes on to unravel the circumstances which led to this fall.

And this is what he writes on the American imperial mindset after this fall: "But what would happen once the Soviet collapse brought an end to competition? The American response to the end of the Cold War was to see it not as the chance to lay down an imperial burden, but as a meta-historic opportunity to shape the course of world history. It was hardly surprising that the seemingly unlimited scope of American ambition bred a mixed reaction. Unrestrained by the need to solicit goodwill, no longer in need of its Cold War alliances, and riding the wave of ideological triumph, America seemed free to use its economic and military muscle against all opposition, and the opposition of all. Talk of an America 'empire', previously confined to the Left, became increasingly common. A universal empire, in which one state imposed its domestic laws upon all the others, was the polar opposite of the long tradition of international law that had evolved in Europe since the seventeenth century." Read this in the context of American actions in Iraq, and Afghanistan after 2001. The passage is an astute summary of the belief system that shaped the recent history of the world.

So, the struggle for empire building continues, as the traditional power centers are being threatened or they wither away because of their own contradictions, as in the case of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In recent times, this discourse has got new flavour with the addition of debate between globalization and nationalism, perhaps made more acrimonious by election of right-wing narrow nationalists to power and crystallisation of conflicting opinions among urban educated middle-class, sharply divided as liberals and conservatives across the globe.

One may seriously pose a question if empire building continues. If an empire is a matter of power and influence, are empires on the rise again? What sort of empires will emerge, if at all, and how will they be different than from early Asian empires and modern colonial European empires? What role will economic riches play in this game? Where will technology fit in the equation given

increasing influence it has on society and politics? What role will religion have in making of these empires, especially considering how events of the last two decades concerning Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) have shaped global thinking and policy making? And the most important question being asked in today's geopolitics: How far China's OBOR (One Belt One Road) initiative qualifies as an exercise in modern empire building? In the words of Bruno Macaes, a political scientist of repute and an expert on the subject, "China's Road and Belt strategy is the most ambitious geopolitical initiative of the age. Covering almost seventy countries by land and sea, it will affect every element of the global society from shipping to agriculture, digital economy to tourism and politics to culture. Most importantly, it symbolises a new phase in China's ambitions as a superpower (read 'Empire')". China displays ambitions to remake the world economy and that Beijing be crowned as the new centre of capitalism and globalization.

3. Conclusion

In little above 500 pages (Arnold Toynbee's A study of history, a 12-volume work contained more than 7,000 pages) Darwin provides a well argued, nuanced, yet clear and highly informative overview of over half a millenium of cross continental interactions and exchanges, which he consistently links to the core theme of rise and fall of regional and then global empires. The depth and width of coverage, assessment, analysis of global events, drawing of conclusions over such a vast period is done remarkably well. Throughout the book, Darwin gives readers a ten thousand feet view of the canvass of world history and then effortlessly zooms onto a specific place and a time. One of the few books on history where events have also been seen with the viewpoint of a loser; and the victor, more often than not, is identified as the ambitious aggressor, manipulator or plain simple fortunate. Chinua Achebe, most well known African author, wrote "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter". Fortunately the book here tries and maintains a balance between the hunted and the hunter. This magnificent book may not be an easy read and the reader may have to read several passages twice to get the essence, but every page has a reward to offer.

The book does have a minor flaw. A study of rise and fall of empires cannot be complete without taking stock of the violence underneath. The quality to inflict violence defined Tamerlane's empire, as in the case of many empires since. Darwin, unfortunately, almost sidesteps this violence and only uses broad strokes to allude to the violence, the brutality of slavery, the displacement of native peoples, and the casualties of imperial wars. A book of this scope would have enhanced its worth if the relationship of violence to empire-building had been given more sustained discussion.

This blemish apart, in the end, it is a great achievement. Big topics demand big treatments, yet few writers are brave or knowledgeable enough to embark upon them. Darwin has provided an ambitious, monumental and convincing reminder that empires are the rule, not the exception in world history. Speaking like a true historian, Darwin also states: 'No prediction is safe. Like all previous generations, we face the future with little more than guesswork on which to build our plans'.

The book is highly recommended for every reader interested in understanding history.

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