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## Acknowledgements

This is a book about how modern Britain has been shaped by its past, and it would have been impossible to write without the enormous number of history books and articles I consulted during my research. I hope readers will consult the plethora of sources cited and I also hope that, in efforts to synthesize, I have not slipped at any stage into plagiarism. A small amount of material may have originally appeared in different form under my byline in *The Times*.

I will refer to the violent events of 1857, when Indian soldiers rebelled against their colonizers, as the Indian Uprising, though they also go by other names, such as the Indian Mutiny, the Indian Rebellion, the Sepoy Mutiny, the Sepoy Revolt and the First War of Independence, depending on your perspective. The changing nature of Ireland's relationship to Britain is just as contentious, and for reasons that will become evident I will be talking about nineteenth-century Ireland as if it were an imperial colony, though it officially became part of the United Kingdom as a result of the Act of Union, passed in 1801.

I take the view that slavery was an aspect of the British empire: this nation wasn't the first into the slave trade, and the slaves weren't taken from a part of the world that was part of British empire at the time, but they were transported to British colonies where they helped sustain vital imperial trade. Britain participated to such a degree that, according to the *Financial Times*, slave-related businesses in the eighteenth century accounted for about the same proportion of GDP as the professional and support services sector does today. As Linda Colley puts it in *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850*: 'Africans transported as slaves across the Atlantic experienced an atrocity that was not peculiar to the British empire, but was certainly fostered by it.'

Where useful, I will translate historical amounts of money into modern equivalents on the detailed advice of an economic historian:

comparisons are difficult when it comes to long-run inflation calculations.<sup>1</sup> And I'm going to spend as little time as possible fretting about definitions: almost every term used in discussion of empire, from 'colony' to 'commonwealth' to 'colonialism', to say nothing of 'race' and 'racism', can be contested, their meanings changing over time. Even 'the British empire' itself has changed in definition, with Nicholas Canny explaining in an essay in *The Oxford History of the British Empire* that 'the adjective "British" meant little to most inhabitants of Britain and Ireland' during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and when England was described as an 'empire' then it was 'with a view to emphasizing the long tradition of independence from foreign potentates, including the Pope, enjoyed by its monarchs through the centuries'.

If we immerse ourselves in definitions, however, we will end up with yet another forbiddingly long academic book on empire, when my ambition is to create something resembling the opposite. Any errors are, of course, entirely my own, but I am grateful for the many people who have helped me navigate the almost infinite amount of material on the subject. Particular thanks to Emanuel Besorai, Helen Carr, Sarah Chalfant, Leigh Gardner, Peter James, Simran Kular, Amandeep Madra, Peter Mitchell, Lottie Moggach, Ferdinand Mount, Mary Mount, Rebecca Rideal, Angela Saini, Assallah Tahir, Ella Taylor, Kim Wagner, Colin Yeo, Alba Ziegler-Bailey.

## I. Empire Day 2.0

My inbox at work is a nightmare. It currently holds 87,875 unread emails, a reflection not of my popularity (a colleague has more than 200,000), but of the fact that public relations professionals vastly outnumber journalists, and sending anyone they know news of the latest printer/teabag they're promoting seems to be part of their job. Intensifying the tedium is that around a third of these messages begin with the greeting: 'I hope your [sic] well'. To which I am always tempted to reply 'My well what? Never runs dry?' or with a precise description of the well my family actually owns on a farm in India. But most enervating of all is the fact that another third of the messages are marketing some kind of awareness event.

It seems that when you can't think of any other way of generating attention for your cause, establishing an 'awareness day' is always an option. There are thousands of them, from National French Bread Day to National Skipping Day, Nude Gardening Day and National Corndog Day. Pointless? Not entirely: I've just been inspired by this research to look up corndogs and am now not only aware of corndogs but desire a corndog for my tea. Inane? More often than not. Which makes it even more surprising that nearly two years after I started looking into how imperialism has shaped modern Britain, I find myself wishing a new one into existence: Empire Awareness Day.

Despite a recent surge of interest in British colonial history, with statues being torn down (or defended), concert halls and schools being renamed (or councils refusing to submit to demands) and companies apologizing for past deeds (or trying to ignore it all), the effect of British empire upon this country is poorly understood. Many of us have learned more about British imperialism in a year or two of statuecide than we did during our entire schooling, but there seems to be a view that if you pull down enough statues/change enough names or fight to keep enough statues up/refuse to change names, you

can delete or defend British imperialism. But British empire defines us more deeply than these controversies suggest and an Empire Day could help explain how.

Such a thing actually existed for decades in the twentieth century. This half-day school holiday was established by the Earl of Meath, to celebrate the splendour of the empire on 24 May each year, the late Queen Victoria's birthday, with the aim of creating a bond between imperial subjects and counteracting what Meath felt was lamentable ignorance about its achievements. The story goes that he once asked a bunch of teenagers whether they had heard of the Indian Uprising, a key event in empire history, and, to his dismay, received just one positive response. For a man who, at Eton, was told that brushing snow off his knees was spineless and unimperial, the implications were unconscionable. Convinced that such ignorance was widespread and undermining faith in civilization's greatest achievement, worried that the British empire might die like most other empires, he started campaigning for the establishment of an annual Empire Day, which had originally been pioneered in Canada in the 1890s.

By 1916, in the middle of the war, when patriotic feeling was at its height, Meath got his way: the British government inaugurated an official Empire Day. He would later claim that his movement had inspired the 'rush to the colours' to fight in the First World War, which seems grandiose, but it certainly did become an institution.<sup>1</sup> The BBC promoted it, notably through an Empire Day special in 1929 presented by Sir Henry Newbolt, and at times allocating more than three hours of scheduling space to it. An Empire Day thanksgiving service at Wembley Stadium attracted around 90,000 people. Most British towns marked the annual event, with marches, music, bonfires and fireworks; newspapers published Empire Day supplements; the occasion inspired Empire-themed shopping weeks; the *Daily Express* organized an Empire Day Festival; celebrations were reported as far away as Australia.<sup>2</sup> And while Empire Day formally died in 1958 when Prime Minister Harold Macmillan announced in Parliament it would be renamed British Commonwealth Day, Empire Day continued to be marked in Protestant schools in Northern Ireland into the 1960s.

I'm not saying it should return in its old form, with children reading

about the downfall of previous empires at school in order to learn about ‘the dangers of subordinating’, receiving a free mug with the news that empire was glorious, saluting the flag, turning up to celebrations in blackface and carrying colonial goods such as tea or sugar. Nor do I envisage Empire Awareness Day having the same aims as Empire Day: the latter focused on sustaining enthusiasm for colonialism, whereas I would want Empire Day 2.0 to explain how the experience of having colonized shapes Britain now. What might it actually involve? Well, as Empire Day is primarily remembered as an annual half-day holiday for most children in most schools, with Meath claiming that the festival was being observed throughout empire in some 55,000 schools by 1909, there would need to be a focus on education. And the simplest thing would be to persuade schools to allocate chunks of the timetable to the cause, with the most obvious candidate being foreign-language lessons.

For one day a year, instead of being taught French or Spanish, the children of Britain could instead be instructed on how the English language itself exists as a living monument to Britain’s deep and complex relationship with the world through empire. More specifically, they could consult the glorious *Hobson–Jobson Dictionary*, a remarkable 1,000-page ‘glossary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, and of kindred terms etymological, historical, geographical and discursive’ compiled by Colonel Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell in 1886, which provides testament to the enormous number of Indian words that have entered English. Many of the citations function as time capsules into the British Raj. ‘Dam’ originally referred to a copper coin, for example, ‘the fortieth part of a rupee’ and so low in value that it led to Britons in India employing the phrase ‘I won’t give a dumri,’ which in turn led to the popular expression ‘I don’t give a dam[n].’ And ‘Juggernaut’ is a corruption of the Sanskrit ‘Jagannatha’, ‘Lord of the Universe, a name of Krishna worshipped as Vishnu at the famous shrine of Puri in Orissa’, the idol of which ‘was, and is, annually dragged forth in procession on a monstrous car, and . . . occasionally persons, sometimes sufferers of painful disease, cast themselves before the advancing wheels.’\*

\* In *Pax Britannica*, Jan Morris produces an unlikely passage that makes use of two dozen examples of English words of Indian origin: ‘Returning to the *bungalow*

If there is time, or, perhaps, if there is a spare period of English going, it could be dedicated to tracing how the definitions of hundreds of other words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* illustrate the linguistic influence of empire beyond India. Students could learn, for instance, how ‘toboggan’ was originally a native American word (‘A light sledge which curves upwards and backwards at the front, and has either a flat bottom or runners’). And how ‘Zombie’ is of West African origin (‘In the West Indies and southern states of America, a soulless corpse said to have been revived by witchcraft; formerly, the name of a snake-deity in voodoo cults of or deriving from West Africa and Haiti’).

Another school lesson that could be usefully hijacked in the name of empire awareness: economics. Many famous enterprises still trading today have their roots in imperial trade, not least Liberty of London, founded by Arthur Lasenby Liberty, the son of a Chesham lace manufacturer who began by selling silks and cashmere shawls from the East when South Asian textiles became popular in the Victorian age. The popularity of South Asian textiles was boosted by the British royal family, with Queen Victoria accepting a shawl from the Maharajah of Kashmir each year, and Kashmiri shawl fabric becoming so important that when the Kashmir Valley was officially annexed to the empire in 1846, the treaty stated that the local maharajah was to pay a yearly tribute of ‘one horse, twelve shawl goats . . . and three pairs of Kashmir shawls’.<sup>3</sup> In the entry for ‘shawl’ in her 2013 edition of *Hobson-Jobson*, Kate Teltcher explains that the expense of the genuine article led to the creation of a domestic shawl industry in Norwich and Paisley that ‘copied Indian designs at a fraction of the price’. Liberty soon moved on to sell oriental goods of all kinds, with

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through the *jungle*, she threw her *calico* bonnet on to the *teak* table, put on her *gingham* apron and slipped into a pair of *sandals*. There was the *tea caddy* to fill, the *chutney* to prepare for the *curry*, *pepper* and *cheroots* to order from the *bazaar* – she would give the boy a *chit*. The children were out in the *dinghy*, and their *khaki dungarees* were sure to be wet. She needed a *shampoo*, she still had to mend Tom’s *pyjamas*, and she never had finished those *chintz* hangings for the *veranda*. Ah well! she didn’t really give a *dam*, and putting a *shawl* around her shoulders, she poured herself a *punch*.

records showing that the shop buildings, which were named East India House, were constructed out of more than 24,000 cubic feet of ships' timbers – one of the ships, which measured the length and height of the Liberty building, being HMS *Hindustan*.<sup>4</sup>

Then there is Shell, established in the nineteenth century by one Marcus Samuel, who started off selling antiques and importing oriental seashells from the Far East, which were at the time fashionable in interior design, establishing the process for a successful import–export business which eventually morphed into one of the world's best-known energy companies (after it had merged with Royal Dutch Petroleum, which came out of the Dutch empire in the East Indies). We also have Man Group, one of the world's largest fund managers, which was founded in 1783 by James Man as a sugar brokerage based in London's Billingsgate, and the Bass Brewery founded in 1777 by William Bass in Burton-upon-Trent, Staffordshire, England. The company's distinctive red triangle became the UK's first registered trademark, and it had become the largest brewery in the world by 1877, with an annual output of 1 million barrels, in part because of the 'pale ale' it exported throughout the British empire. India pale ale had originally been developed elsewhere, when the long sea voyage to India was found to greatly improve the taste of 'stock' beer – four to five months of being gently rocked by the ship and the gradual introduction of heat as the ship neared India resulting in great depth of flavour – but Bass marketed it brilliantly to the shopkeeper-and-clerk class, and in the process helped to transform the brewing industry and put Burton at its centre.<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, students who had already had foreign languages, English and economics lessons might have had enough of British empire by this point of the day, but I'm afraid PE or Games would offer no respite if I had anything to do with it. Playing football? The perfect opportunity to tell students that 'kop', the colloquial name for rising single-tier terraces at football grounds, originally comes from 'Spion Kop', a hill where, according to the historian Robert Tombs, 'British soldiers were picked off by a concealed enemy with Mauser rifles and smokeless ammunition.' Playing cricket? From the nineteenth century, the game became innate to empire, the Imperial Cricket Conference's efforts to standardize the rules of the game



helping to bring the many disparate parts of empire together, while the values of fair play, courage and resilience nurtured on the games fields of public schools were seen as key to developing the imperial ruling race. As the historian John MacKenzie has put it: 'Games became . . . an analogue of war which, with cadet corps and rifle clubs, could prepare the nation's officer class not just for imperial campaigns, but for a global defence against any European rival.'

Though as Empire Day was not exclusively for children, with adults observing it in all sorts of ways, from conducting ceremonies at the London memorial to Lord Meath at Lancaster Gate (which still stands) to singing the National Anthem on the roofs of company headquarters, it would make sense for certain Empire Day 2.0 activities to cater for grown-ups too. And my next suggestion – a day trip around imperial London – would work for all ages. Recent protests have alerted us to how the dark history of colonialism is evident in London through many of its memorials, and of the hundreds of city statues surveyed by one A. Byron in a 1981 book, around 8 per cent have direct links to empire. They include tributes to Major-General Charles Napier, General Gordon and Robert Clive, the pioneer of a territorial empire in India, who didn't let his loathing of India and Indians hold him back from generating huge wealth from the place.

In the centre of town, we also have the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, opened in 1866 as the home for the India Office and Colonial Office, and existing as an expression of Britain's late nineteenth-century ideas about itself in a riot of colonially inflected neo-classical excess.<sup>6</sup> Large statues of East India Company and India Office administrators and military generals stand about dressed in togas and Roman breastplates; a Grand Durbar Court, made for the reception of Indian dignitaries, features allegorical statues in a style that is supposed to be half classical and half Indian; elsewhere, Spiridione Roma's painting *The East Offering its Riches to Britannia* stands proud, originally commissioned by the East India Company for the Revenue Committee room in East India House and depicting a dark-skinned character representing India willingly offering a pale Britannia all her jewellery and treasures, turning violent looting into an act of peaceful benevolence.

But our capital's former role as the metropole of the British empire is evident in numerous other ways, not least its famous museums (the British Museum not only housing a load of imperial loot but being founded on the original collection of Sir Hans Sloane, whose fortune came from marrying the widow of a plantation owner) and the very existence of Wembley Stadium. The stadium has recently been entirely rebuilt, but the former twin towers were an art-deco approximation of Mughal architecture from the colonized subcontinent, and it was originally known as the Empire Stadium, having been established for the 1924 Empire Exhibition, itself described as 'a stock-taking of the whole resources of empire' and attended by some 17 million visitors in 1924 and some 10 million in 1925.<sup>7</sup> As part of the enterprise, 15 miles of walkways and surrounding streets were named by Rudyard Kipling – they included Dominion Way, Union Approach, Atlantic Slope, Craftsman's Way, and a few of these, like Empire Way and Engineers Way, still exist. Across the river, in Wandsworth, a residential area between Battersea Park Road and Falcon Road known as 'Little India' has road names such as Afghan, Cabul, Candahar and Khyber, commemorating the Second Afghan War of 1878–80, complete with the nineteenth-century British spellings of the places they commemorate.

It would, of course, be a public relations catastrophe for any awareness campaign in the twenty-first century to be London-centric, so there would have to be a parallel programme of Empire Day 2.0 tours across the country, a task that would, as it happens, be no harder than planning the London itinerary, so many of our cities having been shaped by empire. The tearing down in Bristol of the statue of Edward Colston, some of whose wealth came directly from the slave trade, which he personally oversaw as Deputy Governor of the Royal African Company, and the (disputed) claim that Liverpool's Penny Lane commemorates the slave trader James Penny, have made the influence of empire on provincial life the stuff of general knowledge. But, as with London, the imperial heritage goes much deeper. Bristol is also the city from which the pioneer John Cabot set sail in 1497 in one of the voyages that arguably laid the foundations for the British empire. Liverpool, a city which Karl Marx famously claimed 'waxed

fat on the slave trade', has its imperial legacy reflected not just in its size, growing as it did from a handful of streets in 1207 to a vigorous eighteenth-century city, but also in a frieze around the handsome Town Hall illustrating trading routes and featuring lions, crocodiles, elephants and African faces. Meanwhile, in Belfast, Empire Awareness Day participants could be encouraged to visit Bombay Street, Kashmir Street, Cawnpore Street, Lucknow Street and Benares Street, all named in celebration of famous campaigns of the British empire, with nests of similar imperial street names existing across Britain, wherever terraced housing was being built at the height of imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Meanwhile, in Glasgow, the so-called second city of the empire, which from the mid-eighteenth century became a major port for rum, sugar and tobacco grown by slaves, participants in Empire Day 2.0 could be directed to the street names such as Jamaica Street, Tobago Street and Antigua Street, commemorating historic associations with sugar plantations and the so-called Tobacco Lords, who grew rich as exports from British colonial settlements rose from around 30 million pounds of the American plant in 1700 to about 76 million pounds in 1800.<sup>8</sup> And as for my home region, the Black Country, the complicated legacy of empire is reflected in the inclusion of a chain in the official flag – featured because Wolverhampton was once a leading producer of iron goods such as manacles, chains, fetters and locks (but also a reminder that the region supplied shackles to pin down slaves) – in the statue of Prince Albert in the middle of the city (which stands as an inadvertent reminder of the fact that the Consort became a staunch supporter of abolition, and was President of the African Civilization Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade) and in the name of the famous local football ground for the mighty Wolverhampton Wanderers, Molineux (the Molineux family in Wolverhampton had some involvement in the Jamaican rum industry, and a sea captain gave them as a present a Sierra Leonean child slave whom they named George John Scipio Africanus and proceeded to educate).

Eating is, of course, a necessary part of both the school day and sightseeing, and lunchtime would, you've guessed it, be an

opportunity to continue the spirit of the enterprise. Any school lunch provides the perfect occasion to teach people that free school meals are arguably a legacy of empire – some historians maintaining that many of the social reforms that led to the modern-day welfare state came about because politicians worried that the poor health of the newly urbanized working classes was endangering Britain's ability to maintain an empire and hold its own against growing competition from Germany, America and Japan. These concerns peaked around the time of the Boer Wars, when a national scandal erupted over the poor physical and educational quality of the recruits, more than a third of whom had been dismissed as unfit. This converged with the growing acceptance of eugenics – the idea that the success of the nation depended on breeding and maintaining a healthy Anglo-Saxon 'stock'. Horrified by the idea that poor housing, adulterated food, malnutrition, lack of healthcare and deficits in both literacy and moral and religious education might be causing the British race to degenerate until it resembled the races it was born to rule over, politicians introduced a raft of measures from the state pension to compulsory school medical services, unemployment and sickness insurance, maternity benefits paid direct to nursing mothers rather than through their husbands, and the new Mental Health Act of 1913 which allowed for the involuntary segregation of 'mental defectives' in institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Empire Day 2.0 menus could teach a great deal too, and they wouldn't necessarily have to focus on obviously colonial dishes like Mulligatawny soup (still available in the Heinz tinned range, but consumed by no one I know, and originating, according to *Hobson-Jobson*, from the Tamil *milagu-tannir*, meaning 'pepper-water'). Many of our more mainstream dishes are also of imperial origin. The popularity of curry, arguably our national dish now, is of course a testament to how empire changed our tastes. The great Sunday roast first became possible on a mass scale after the development of refrigeration and imports of meat could be brought in from the colonies (and elsewhere): by the late nineteenth century, Britain absorbed 60 per cent of all meat traded globally, the imports from places like Australia and New Zealand permitting the working classes their weekly roast.<sup>10</sup>

The great British institution of the Christmas pudding is undeniably English in origin, but it nevertheless became a symbol of unity within empire when, in the 1920s, a quango called the Empire Marketing Board used it to create the notion of the 'Empire Pudding'. In a promotional exercise worthy of the organizers of the International Day of the Nacho, they came up with the idea of creating a Christmas pudding for the royal family, where 'each ingredient had been sourced from one of the British colonies'. Such a focus on imperial foodstuffs and raw materials was a common visual aid at the time for schools teaching imperialism, so-called object lessons, featuring boxes full of everything from raw cotton to loaf sugar, saffron, rice and camphor.\* Then there is sugar, the addiction to which propelled the endless need for labourers on plantations, which in turn drove the slave trade, for a long time a key element of British empire.

Moreover, many aspects of the *way* we get our food originate from the age of empire. Food miles? Colonial imports of perishable food and drink were transported over huge distances to become everyday staples for the general population. Processed food? The British pioneered the technology, thanks to centuries of experience in transporting foods to feed their colonists at every corner of the globe, with the first food-canning factory opened in Bermondsey in 1813. One of the major companies, Crosse & Blackwell, still operates,

\* In 1911 Rudyard Kipling supplied a poem, entitled 'Big Steamers', for a textbook which conveyed how much Britain relied on empire. It opens:

'OH, where are you going to, all you Big Steamers,  
With England's own coal, up and down the salt seas?  
'We are going to fetch you your bread and your butter,  
Your beef, pork, and mutton, eggs, apples, and cheese.'  
'And where will you fetch it from, all you Big Steamers,  
And where shall I write you when you are away?  
'We fetch it from Melbourne, Quebec, and Vancouver.  
Address us at Hobart, Hong-kong, and Bombay.'  
'But if anything happened to all you Big Steamers,  
And suppose you were wrecked up and down the salt sea?  
'Why, you'd have no coffee or bacon for breakfast,  
And you'd have no muffins or toast for your tea.'

although its imperial slogan, ‘The name that is known to the ends of the earth’, has been consigned to history.

Meanwhile, there is no shortage of drinks with imperial origins: Rose’s Lime Juice Cordial was, for instance, devised in the 1860s by Lauchlan Rose as a method of preserving juice without alcohol, the world’s first concentrated fruit drink, making use of imported lime juice from the West Indies; it was discovered that, as with pale ale, the flavour of madeira wine was improved by being shipped around the globe; spotting the potential of rum, British merchants turned it from a niche Caribbean drink into a global phenomenon; and the great British gin and tonic originally became popular among the British abroad when they learned that the quinine in tonic had anti-malarial properties. This led to an upper-class character in the woeful 1976 British comedy *Spanish Fly* observing that ‘gin and tonic was the cornerstone of the British empire’. Played by Terry-Thomas, the character continued: ‘The empire was built on gin and tonic. Gin to fight the boredom of exile and quinine to fight malaria. How else do you think we could have carried the cross of responsibility for the life of millions without the friendly fortitude of gin and tonic?’<sup>11</sup> But there is, of course, nothing more imperial than the most British drink of all: a cup of sweetened tea. After all, tea was originally a Chinese plant traded for opium grown in Bengal (and the subcontinent later grew tea itself); the sugar to sweeten it was originally cultivated by African slaves on West Indian plantations (and later by Indian indentured labourers). Nonetheless, the drink became central to our national identity, while sugar also transformed our cuisine, increasing the consumption of vegetables and fruit by making them more palatable in tarts, preserves and pies.

Which brings us to the fact that a whole host of great British institutions actually came about or flourished because of empire. The Scouts? Conceived and founded by Sir Robert Baden-Powell to turn a new generation of boys ‘into good citizens or useful colonists’; he wanted to call them the Imperial Scouts, but was talked out of it by his publisher. Baden-Powell also founded the Girl Guides Association in 1909, setting its principles with his sister Agnes in its first handbook, entitled *How Girls Can Help to Build up the Empire*. Panto? Well, *Aladdin* is the

most famous, and it features Widow Twankey, of course, as Aladdin's mother, with Twankay or 'twankey' being a substandard Chinese green tea. Our famous security services which inspire blockbusters like James Bond? It has been pointed out that this country has a history of first developing and perfecting its policing methods in the colonies before bringing them to Britain. For instance, our very first official police system was tried out in Ireland before being initiated in Britain in 1829; fingerprinting was developed in India as a tool to control the population, before being brought to Britain to be used in the detection of crimes;<sup>\*</sup> then, in 1883, the Special Branch of the London Metropolitan Police was established in order to deal with Irish troublemakers, and was led by those with experience in Ireland and India.<sup>12</sup>

And then we have the royal family. As British as you get, right? Well, leaving aside the family's foreign roots, reflected in the fact that Queen Victoria was known to speak to Prince Albert in German, and the fact that it was Queen Elizabeth I who granted the East India Company a royal charter and lent to slave trader John Hawkins her own vessel 'specifically for the purpose of capturing Africans on the West African coast',<sup>13</sup> many academics maintain that our reverence for the royals was closely bound up with empire, and vice versa. Such patriotic feeling reached its peak during a period which saw Queen Victoria being dubbed 'Empress of India' (in 1876) and which witnessed extravagant Diamond Jubilee celebrations (in 1897). Victoria famously enjoyed signing herself 'V.R. & I.' – Victoria Regina et Imperatrix – and entertaining imperial visitors at her palaces; the future George V went on tours of empire (with his brother Albert Victor, then heir to the throne, in 1879–82 and for almost eight months in 1901) and, when he took the throne, his first two Christmas broadcasts are thought to have been written by the arch-imperialist

\* When achieving one of the earliest prosecutions using fingerprint evidence in Britain, Richard Muir, the prosecutor at the Old Bailey, emphasized the imperial connection. The technique, he declared in 1902, was 'of the greatest importance in the administration of the criminal law, and was now being introduced into this country on a very large scale for the purpose of identifying habitual criminals, as well as being applied to the detection of individual crimes. The system had had an extensive trial in our dependency in India.'

Rudyard Kipling; his first Christmas message was preceded by an hour-long programme about the empire, and the first speech of his that was ever broadcast was his opening address at the Empire Exhibition of 1924.<sup>14</sup> In her Christmas messages Queen Elizabeth II, who received news of her father's death and her own elevation while visiting a game reserve in Kenya, was referring to empire until the 1960s, while 'the confetti of empire' was, according to Britain's envoy to India, still noticeable at her coronation in 1953, with the BBC broadcasting a calypso song composed for the occasion by the Trinidadian singer Young Tiger.<sup>15</sup>

Lord Meath was enthusiastic about using the monarchy and empire to promote one another, and when the Empire Marketing Board came up with the notion of the 'Empire pudding' for the royal family, he got involved in the project. He arranged for the dessert to be made at Vernon House, the headquarters of the Royal Over-Seas League in London, an occasion which was filmed for a newsreel called *Think and Eat Imperially*,<sup>16</sup> and watching it on YouTube more than ninety years later is a mildly unsettling experience. It depicts Lord Meath, labelled as 'Empire Movement Veteran', awkwardly encouraging a series of representatives from the Dominions to take turns to throw relevant ingredients into the mix of the King's empire Christmas pudding. So we see Zanzibar cloves being presented by black men in fez hats, South African raisins being presented by white women in uniforms, English beer being presented by a sturdy man with a moustache and a barrel on his shoulder, and the overall vibe is a cross between that of a stilted Indian wedding, a Jamie Oliver cookery demonstration and, with Lord Meath sporting a top hat, all-black

\* The lyrics included the lines:

Troops from Dominions and Colonies,  
Australia, New Zealand and West Indies,  
India, Ceylon, West Africa,  
Newfoundland, Gibraltar and Canada.  
They were there  
At the Coronation,  
I was there  
At the Coronation.



clothes and a heavy chain, a rap video. There is mercifully no black-face but, frankly, it's a struggle to imagine how it was considered entertainment then, or why it was deemed worthy of release.

The only explanation I can conceive is that perhaps, in the 1920s, simply seeing people from around the world interacting with the British was intrinsically fascinating. Such cosmopolitanism is a humdrum feature of London life now, of course, our multiculturalism largely being a consequence of our once having colonized a quarter of the world. The reason I am sitting here, as a person of colour in Britain, talking about this country as my home, is because several hundred years ago some Britons decided to take control of parts of the Asian subcontinent. In turn, this serves to highlight the fact that the things we have touched upon so far as legacies of empire are actually small fry. It's all very well highlighting empire awareness by talking about how our honours list still hands out Orders of the British Empire, how many of our common garden plants were originally imported into Britain by imperialists, or how Worcestershire sauce might originally have been an Indian recipe, reportedly brought back to Britain by an ex-governor of Bengal. But our imperial past has had a much more profound effect on modern Britain.

Empire explains why we have a diaspora of millions of Britons spread around the world. Empire explains the global pretensions of our Foreign and Defence secretaries. Empire explains the feeling that we are exceptional and can go it alone when it comes to everything from Brexit to dealing with global pandemics. Empire helped to establish the position of the City of London as one of the world's major financial centres, and also ensures that the interests of finance trump the interests of so many other groups in the twenty-first century. Empire explains how some of our richest families and institutions and cities became wealthy. Empire explains our particular brand of racism, it explains our distrust of cleverness, our propensity for jingoism. Let's face it, imperialism is not something that can be erased with a few statues being torn down or a few institutions facing up to their dark pasts or a few accomplished individuals declining an OBE; it exists as a legacy in my very being and, more widely, explains nothing less than who we are as a nation.

## 2. Imperialism and Me

The Punjab has always interested me, but I never saw it as fun. When I visited with my mother – twice, as a child and as a young man – it was where I was dragged around countless temples and relatives' houses in enervating heat, where strangers mocked my Indian-language skills, calling people from other parts of the village to listen to me struggling to articulate the most basic sentiments in a Black Country accent, and where I was encouraged to play with farm animals when all I actually wanted was access to a Nintendo. At home in Wolverhampton, where I grew up feeling as English as I did Asian, it was a part of the world where National Front yobs wanted to boot me back to, and the place where a substantial portion of my extended family seemed to succumb to substance abuse (a startling number of my fifty-four first cousins dying as a result of alcohol and drug addictions in the Punjab), to religious fanaticism (one got involved with the Sikh separatist movement and was killed) and to other violence (one of my uncles murdered another).

It turns out, however, that visiting the Punjab as an adult in the twenty-first century is a wholly different experience. My Punjabi is ropier than ever – when I try to buy a 'lathi' (stick), one shopkeeper seems to think I'm asking for a 'lassi' (the drink) – but it's the first time I feel at home in India. What was regarded as the 'third world' in the 1980s and 1990s is now a key state in an emerging superpower, and while Mumbai and Delhi are increasingly indistinguishable from most global cities, Amritsar has so much colour and character it feels like walking around inside a feature in *National Geographic*. Sikhs are a minority in both Britain and India and it feels extraordinary to be somewhere where, for once, my people are everywhere. I encounter Sikh policemen, Sikh pilots, Sikh doctors, even Sikh vagrants – my astonishment at the sight of the latter an inversion of the surprise my immigrant parents felt on arriving in Britain and discovering that

even white people could be poor. In the middle of the city stands the Golden Temple, home to hundreds of volunteers feeding tens of thousands of people each day in the name of humanity and epitomizing the best of Sikhism. And then, the cuisine! The late Anthony Bourdain once said that the Punjab was the only place where vegetarian food didn't feel like a chore – which feels like an understatement. As a result, this visit to the Punjab, where I have come to make a documentary, feels more like a holiday than work and the luxury of the experience is accentuated by the fact that I am being guided around Amritsar by some leading historians, who know this amazing city better than anyone.

Chief among them is Kim Wagner, who, as we walk off our jet lag, highlights objects and places of interest, including a memorial built in the middle of Amritsar to honour the Sikhs – namely the twenty-one soldiers of the 36th Sikh Regiment who fought to the last man at the Battle of Saragarhi, on 12 September 1897, during one of the British campaigns on the North-West Frontier. Standing in front of it, Kim tells me that the battle occurred at a time when the situation in Afghanistan was as flammable as it is now, and when ongoing tensions between the British empire and Russia over various territories were referred to as 'the Great Game'. The twenty-one Sikh soldiers stood their ground against an onslaught of 10,000 enemy tribesmen – the Sikhs making a valiant and suicidal last stand, forcing the enemy to pay a high price for their victory, with around 180 dead. To commemorate their bravery, this Sikh temple, or *gurdwara*, was unveiled by the British in 1904. And as Kim continues regaling me with the details, that when news of the battle reached London both Houses of Parliament gave a rare standing ovation in honour of the Sikhs who had died holding the post, and that the events prompted Viscount Slim to remark that 'You are never disappointed when you are with Sikhs,' I feel pride.

I should confess that at this point of my journey into the story of British empire my history is poor. I have a GCSE in history under my belt, but it left me with little more than superficial knowledge of the world wars, the Tudors and Tollund Man. Meanwhile, my education in British empire was almost non-existent. In fact, looking back,

it's almost as if teachers went out of their way to avoid telling us about it: we explored both world wars at length, for example, but I don't recall it once being mentioned that tens of thousands of brown people from across empire were fighting for Britain and that empire made great financial contributions too; and while we studied the Irish Potato Famine, no one cared to illustrate the tragedy by comparison to famines in India. At this stage I am aware, however, that we Sikhs did better than other colonized people out of empire.

I know that, although we were finally defeated by the British during the Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1845–6 and 1848–9,\* Sikhs were generally respected by the British, largely taking the side of the colonizers during the Uprising of 1857, fighting in large numbers for Britain in both world wars – according to the WWI Sikh Memorial Fund, around 130,000 Sikhs took part, making up 20 per cent of the British Indian Army (despite making up less than 1 per cent of the population) – and being posted to Singapore and Hong Kong. I recall my grandfather comparing British empire favourably to the 1980s government of Indira Gandhi and telling me how the British had transformed the once forsaken Punjab by tapping the waters of its five rivers to make it one of the most productive and prosperous provinces in India. And Sikhs have traditionally been keen to make the most of opportunities for relocation within empire, whether it was travelling en masse to build a railway in East Africa, or in smaller numbers to work as pedlars in Britain in the early twentieth century, or in larger numbers again to staff British factories in the 1960s and 1970s.

\* Before this, Maharajah Ranjit Singh enjoyed cordial relations with the British, who signed the Sutlej Treaty with the Sikh empire in April 1809. In *Empire of the Sikhs*, Patwant Singh writes: 'According to its provisions the Lahore Durbar would not relinquish its sovereignty over the territories acquired by it south of the Sutlej prior to 1806. The "perpetual friendship", according to the treaty, would rest on these four main clauses: that the British would leave control of the territories north of the Sutlej to the Sikh state; Ranjit Singh would not maintain "more troops than are necessary for the internal duties" of his territories south of the Sutlej; he would "not commit or suffer any encroachments on the possessions or rights of the chiefs in its vicinity"; in the event of a violation of these articles, or a "departure from the rules of friendship", the treaty would be considered terminated.'

Indeed, as the relevant Wikipedia entry states: 'British Sikhs are considered one of the best examples of cultural integration in the United Kingdom.' The 'Indian' food in British curry houses is no such thing, rather a merging of dishes from different regions tweaked for a conservative British palate by mostly Bangladeshi chefs, but many of the staples of what is now our national cuisine – the pakoras, the samosas, the saag – are recognizably Punjabi. Perhaps because the army set a precedent by allowing Sikh soldiers to keep their turbans, Sikhs in Britain have had the kind of success fighting for specific entitlements, such as the right to be exempted from laws requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets, and the right to carry the ceremonial kirpan (dagger), that many other minority groups have not enjoyed. There are now Sikhs in the Commons and the Lords, and a diamond that once belonged to a Sikh maharajah is among the Crown Jewels and likely to be worn by Camilla and Kate in their role as consorts to the King.

In short, it seems the Sikhs did relatively well out of empire and, frankly, it feels good to be admiring this impressive monument in our most sacred city to the historically fruitful relations between the two aspects of my dual identity. But the positivity doesn't last, because our next stop in Amritsar is a park down the road: Jallianwala Bagh. This pleasant open space, about the size of Trafalgar Square, is where, almost exactly a century before my visit, at 5.15pm on a Sunday, General Reginald Dyer stormed in with what he called his 'special party' of fifty armed infantry. Having recently arrived in the city to quash a supposed uprising against the British, and having hours earlier issued what he claimed were clear warnings against public gatherings, he concluded that the people assembled there – between 15,000 and 20,000 men, women and children – were intentionally resisting Raj rule. With no further warning, he ordered his troops to fire. As one, the huge crowd 'seemed to sink to the ground' according to witness Sergeant W. J. Anderson, 'a whole flutter of white garments'. There were few opportunities to escape: those climbing walls were targeted and shot, as was anyone seen running to the exit. At one point, according to a British eyewitness, Dyer asked one of his officers, 'Do you think they've had enough?', before adding, 'No, we'll

give them four rounds more.’ And at the end of ten minutes of carnage, 1,650 shots had been fired, an average of thirty-three bullets per soldier. The official number of deaths was eventually set at 379, with around three times as many wounded, but Kim puts the number of deaths at between 600 and 1,000, and other estimates put both tallies in their thousands.<sup>1</sup>

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre is one of the key events of the twentieth century, arguably marking the moment the Raj lost its grip on the largest empire in human history, and after which the momentum for Indian independence became unstoppable. The Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore described it as ‘without parallel in the history of civilised governments’ and returned his knighthood in protest. The independence activist Motilal Nehru, father of the first Prime Minister of India, symbolically burned his European furniture and clothes. Gandhi declared that he had lost his trust in British justice, saying that he had ‘underrated the forces of evil’ in the empire. And in Britain, even the imperialist Winston Churchill famously described the incident as ‘monstrous’, while the Labour politician J. C. Wedgwood declared it had ‘destroyed our reputation throughout the world . . . and damns us for all time’. With the centenary of the atrocity just months away in 2019, it is also the reason I’m in Amritsar with a TV documentary crew. But, to my shame, I know barely anything about it before coming here, what little knowledge I have deriving from the pivotal scene in Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi*, which I once watched when getting progressively tipsy on a long flight.

Just when I think I’ve learned the worst about the massacre, Kim proffers more devastating detail. The crowd at Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April 1919 had gathered in peace. Some were there to listen to a political speech, but the majority were ordinary students, watchmakers, barbers, hawkers, pedlars and pilgrims visiting the Golden Temple to mark the festival of Vaisakhi,\* just as I have

\* The Sikh equivalent of Easter, Vaisakhi commemorates Guru Gobind Singh’s creation of the fellowship of the Khalsa, and is considered so auspicious that Maharajah Ranjit Singh chose the day of the festival in April 1801 to proclaim himself the ruler of the Sikh empire.

done on earlier trips with my mum, and as my own extended family in nearby villages still do. The victims, most of whom were entirely unaware of the warnings Dyer had erratically issued across the city, included women and more than forty children, some as young as one. Dyer remarked afterwards that he would have used the machine guns on his armoured cars if he could have physically got them into the Bagh, but the rifles used by troops were deadly enough. A single bullet from a .303 Lee Enfield rifle of the type used in the massacre could rip through several bodies – stray shots killed at least one woman outside the Bagh – and the weapons could fire tens of rounds a minute. A military curfew meant that the injured were not tended to, and many of them subsequently died.

Accounts show that doctors who later treated victims were harassed by the authorities for the details of their patients, because anyone who had been at Jallianwala Bagh was labelled a potential enemy of the state. Groups of men who were, with no evidence whatsoever, deemed to have been involved in ‘riots’ or disturbances before the massacre were arrested, ordered to stand in the brutal heat for hours, flogged until they passed out, dragged by the beard, kicked up and down streets and subjected to the sexual violence that was routine in colonial India. Although eventually forced to resign by the Army Council, Dyer was subsequently effectively exonerated by the House of Lords, and the *Morning Post*, which was eventually absorbed into the *Daily Telegraph*, started a public fund to support him. Contributors to the fund, who included Rudyard Kipling and ‘one who remembers 1857’, raised £26,000 (the equivalent today of £4.4 million). In contrast, the relatives of those killed received on average just 8,700 rupees each (modern equivalent, £141,537).

Later that afternoon, I go to a different part of the city, to look at the spot on a street where a British missionary, Marcia Sherwood, had been attacked in the riots that preceded the massacre, which led Dyer to pronounce that the area should be turned into a ‘sacred space’. He had already subjected Amritsar to collective punishment for what he considered an uprising: both the water and electricity supplies to the city had been cut off and all Indians were subject to flogging if they did not salute/salaam to every Englishman they encountered.

But now Dyer decided that no Indians were allowed to set foot on this 'sacred' street, and ordered each end to be barricaded. If a local really had to go down it, they had to do so on all fours. The British soldiers who enforced the order at the end of bayonets, occasionally pissing into the well at the end of the street as they did so, made no exceptions, even forcing a blind elderly beggar named Kahan Chand to crawl when he unwittingly stumbled on to the scene.

Walking down this 'crawling lane' a hundred years later, I wouldn't have wanted to get down on my hands and knees even with modern sewage systems, but this is what members of my family could have been forced to do had they been in Amritsar then, purely because of the colour of their skin. As Kim points out in his book, this method of punishment is reminiscent of the British response to the Siege of Cawnpore in 1857, when General Neill forced Indian prisoners to lick up the blood in the house where British women and children had been killed, essentially an exercise in ritualized racial humiliation. But then it is apparent that everything about the way empire operated during this period of history was racialized. Speaking decades after the event, a British soldier from 1919 is recorded describing the Amritsar protestors as 'striking niggers'. One of Dyer's colleagues, Brigadier-General Drake-Brockman, who led British troops during uprisings in Delhi a few weeks before Jallianwala Bagh, openly called the rioting crowd 'scum'. He went on: 'I am of firm opinion that if they had got a bit more firing given them it would have done them a world of good and their attitude would be much more amenable and respectful, as force is the only thing that an Asiatic has any respect for.'

Jallianwala Bagh was not a uniquely Sikh tragedy by any means: there were more Hindu and Muslim deaths in the initial British report, and indeed some of Dyer's lethal riflemen were Sikhs. More than anything else, it was a formative national event for the whole of India. But it was nonetheless a defining event for the Sikh community and my investigation into it leaves me as depressed about British-Sikh relations as the Saragarhi memorial had made me feel uplifted about them. The massacre and its aftermath illustrate that, as well as being indulged, the Sikhs were seen by some imperial Brits as racially inferior and dispensable. What I learn leaves me bitter that



my education didn't instil this crucial knowledge into me, ashamed I didn't find out about it myself, and the TV broadcast of my documentary reveals that I'm not alone in my ignorance. By far the most common response from viewers is 'I had no idea' and 'I was taught nothing about empire at school,' and among those who had heard of the Amritsar Massacre, details were sketchy: some fellow British Sikhs even confessed that they had confused the events of 1919 with the Indian government's actions against Sikhs during Operation Blue Star in 1984. Above all, I feel embarrassed that I have written two books about the British Sikh experience without really understanding the crucial position of Sikhs during empire.

There turn out to be many more demonstrations of anti-Sikh racism beyond what happened at Jallianwala Bagh. Here, during the Battle of Gujarat (1849), an encounter during the Second Anglo-Sikh War, we see Britons dehumanizing Sikhs, losing just 96 men in the course of slaughtering some 3,000 Sikhs, an officer of the 9th Lancers remarking in the process that enemies running for their lives were 'of course shot', with Sikhs hiding in trees providing 'great sport for our men, who were firing up at them as at so many rooks . . . down they would come like a bird, head downward, and bleeding most profusely'.<sup>2</sup> Here, in the Indian Pavilion of the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition, we have Sikhs being described as lacking 'a ray of intelligence'. Here, in 1872, we have Deputy Commissioner J. L. Cowan summarily executing sixty-eight Namdhari Sikh prisoners in a form of collective punishment following an attack on the small Muslim principality of Malerkotla in the Punjab: the method he chose was to fire the victims from cannons, meaning that their body parts were so scattered they could not be retrieved for funeral rites.

And as for the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond: far from being a celebratory reflection of great British-Sikh relations, the brutal truth is that it ended up in the Crown Jewels only after it had been seized from Maharajah Ranjit Singh's family by the East India Company: the campaign to have it returned is very much alive. It's true, Sikhs volunteered in massive numbers for the First World War, to fight for a nation that had annexed their empire, but they were not rewarded for their loyal service: one of the many things that had been fuelling