

Queen Elizabeth II Wasn't Innocent of Her Empire's Sins

The late queen incarnated and ably helped sell her nation and its system while never criticizing or apologizing for its past.

By Howard W. French, a columnist at Foreign Policy.

In the late 1550s, taking stock of affairs in Europe, an English queen named Elizabeth grew worried about being left behind in a new race underway among her country's neighbors on the continent: the construction of a far-flung empire.

The Portuguese and Spanish had established an early dominance in this endeavor. The former had shown the way, earning fortunes trading with West Africans for gold beginning late in the 15th century before perfecting a revolutionary formula that conjoined plantation agriculture with race-based chattel slavery to produce tropical commodities on tiny São Tomé. Their model, based on sugar cultivation and commerce of the enslaved Africans who fueled it, would quickly come to dominate economic life in the Atlantic for centuries, supercharging European economies and propelling the rise of the West over the so-called rest.

England's imperial history up to Queen Elizabeth I's time had been mostly limited to dominating its neighbor Ireland. But the sovereign whose era we mostly associate with author William Shakespeare yearned for a far-bigger stage and encouraged the gentry as well as pirates like John Hawkins to venture out beyond the English Channel to raid Portuguese and Spanish ships and get in on their booty of gold and human beings extracted from coastal West Africa.

In doing so, that first Elizabeth laid the early groundwork for what would eventually become the British empire. Her successors took her efforts further with the 1631 formation of the colorfully named Company of Merchant Adventurers of London. Here, adventure meant the violent quest for gold and slaves in the tropics. Before long, the company was rebranded in a way that took all the mystery out of the principal geographical target. It was called the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa and was ambitiously granted a monopoly on the lucrative trade of that continent for a period of 1,000 years.

In that same decade, as I have argued in my book, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War*, the most important foundational act of English empire-building took shape on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, where the English colonized Barbados, a small island in the eastern Caribbean that is approximately one-third the surface area of present-day Los Angeles.

In Barbados, the English quickly implemented the morally indefensible but economically unbeatable economic model that the Portuguese had recently devised in São Tomé. The near-total replacement by mid-century of white indentured servants with enslaved men and women who were brought in chains from Africa and deliberately worked to death—almost as many as the number of enslaved people brought to the incomparably larger mainland North America—turned sugar cultivation in Barbados into a virtual license to print money.

Early stories of the European New World empire commonly taught in Western schools are dominated by famous acts of plunder by Spanish conquistadors against great Native American civilizations like the Inca and Aztec, filling galleons with astounding quantities of silver and gold. As the English proved in Barbados though, even bigger money was to be made from plantation agriculture built on the backs of enslaved Africans, starting in the Caribbean.

Given the immensity of the horrors inflicted through slavery on Black people in the Caribbean, the British have traditionally preferred to think of their empire as having been seated in India. But starting long before the Raj, it was this region, the so-called West Indies, that would see a succession of the richest colonies in economic history. These culminated in the French chanel house plantations of Saint-Domingue, where an uprising of Africans that began in 1791 would ultimately see the liberation of enslaved people and the birth of the second oldest republic in the Americas, which they named Haiti.

There has long existed a cottage industry of historical denial in Europe—and nowhere more so than in Britain—about the importance of slavery to that continent’s emergence in the modern era as the richest and most powerful region in the world. From this camp, the message is that the commerce in slaves itself was never a very profitable business and that plantation agriculture was of very limited importance to Europe’s success.

There are many reasons why this seems silly on the face of it. A good place to start is with the fact that former French leader Napoleon Bonaparte sent the largest maritime expedition across the Atlantic Ocean that France had ever mounted to suppress the slave rebellion on his extraordinarily profitable colony of Saint-Domingue, only to see his troops defeated. Knowing how rich an opportunity the control of this slave society represented, Spain then tried its hand at defeating the Africans of Saint-Domingue, only to suffer the same fate.

Not leaving well-enough alone, Britain, the greatest in this succession of the great imperial powers of the age, then organized its own largest maritime expedition up to that point in history to attempt to grab this unsurpassed prize. The British forces also went down in ignominious defeat, losing more men than they had lost in the incomparably better-known American Revolution. Despite these lost lives, no regimental banners dedicated to their memory fly anywhere in Britain, nor do most schools there ever mention this history.

(Of course, France wasn’t done yet. Already defeated once, Napoleon sent another expeditionary force to Saint-Domingue hoping to keep the enslaved people in their yokes. It too was defeated, soon afterward forcing the French to sell the Louisiana Purchase to the government of then-U.S. President Thomas Jefferson, thereby doubling the size of the young United States.)

To the extent that slavery has come up at all in the fulsome and seemingly endless celebrations of the life of the second English queen to carry the name Elizabeth, it has been to note that she presided over the end of her nation’s empire and the wave of decolonization that took place in the 20th century. As someone who has spent a long career in the world of the once colonized and who has written much about slavery and its many effects on the world, the haste to pass over the details of empire and its roots in enslavement, domination, and extraction of human and natural resources has felt very strange.

Like almost every reader of this column, I too have lived entirely in the era of Queen Elizabeth II. It is not difficult to grant, as many have, that her serene and confident countenance

was all too rare and served as a grounding force in a world of constant and often confusing change. I bear no ill will toward her following her death. Her empire—and empires more generally—though is another matter.

In the present moment, many British people feel pride that their new government has reached new heights of racial and ethnic diversity, which is good and true. But let us not allow this nor any of the force-fed commemorations over television to cause us to forget that for nearly its entire history, “empire” as practiced by the British was synonymous with unconcealed racial supremacy. That, in fact, was one of its central premises.

Let us also not be deceived by any of the glib and shallow commentary that seeks to associate this (or any) empire with democracy. There is an excellent English word for this: “poppycock,” meaning nonsense. The country’s Conservative chancellor of the exchequer, an avatar of the new diversity, is Kwasi Kwarteng—a child of immigrants in the 1960s from Ghana, a former British colony. In his 2011 book, *Ghosts of Empire: Britain’s Legacies in the Modern World*, he got it right when he stated: “Notions of democracy could not have been further from the minds of the imperial administrators themselves. Their heads were filled with ideas of class, loosely defined, of intellectual superiority and of paternalism.”

It is where Kwarteng goes from there, in describing the British empire as an example of “benign authoritarianism,” that he and I diverge. This persistent, self-serving myth survives mostly as a result of the deliberate act of not looking too hard. If anything, throughout the overwhelming bulk of its history, this empire, born in enslavement, had even less to do with human rights than it did with democracy.

I frequently write about Africa and could fill this argument with numerous examples from that continent to buttress my case. Here, though, it would be more helpful to demonstrate that the British empire was indiscriminate in riding roughshod over other races. I wonder what, for example, Kwarteng would say about Britain’s prolonged narcotrafficking policy aimed at balancing its trade and extending its dominance over China through the militarized spread of the opium trade?

Two important books help make this point, one already a classic and the other new. In his epic, groundbreaking 2000 work, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, historian Mike Davis documented how Britain took advantage of a series of epochal global droughts in the late 19th century to advance its program of territorial aggrandizement and political dominion over numerous far-flung peoples.

India was a particular target, where all-powerful British colonial officials, such as Robert Bulwer-Lytton and Victor Bruce (the latter more famously known as Lord Elgin), grimly oversaw the large-scale export of foodstuffs and increased local taxation to finance wars in places including Afghanistan and South Africa amid a series of extraordinarily devastating famines. All the while, colonial administrators gutted relief programs aimed at the poor, whom they scorned as socially and economically redundant. To argue against humanitarian aid, many claimed this would just make the dying peasants lazy.

Perhaps the most damning sentence of all though in a book that amounts to an overwhelming and minutely documented indictment is this: “If the history of British rule in India were to be condensed into a single fact, it is this: there was no increase in India’s per capita income from 1757 to 1947.”

The more recent book, African studies professor Caroline Elkins's new *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire*, which I have written about previously, provides extensive focus on the 20th century, including many acts of imperial barbarity that occurred during Elizabeth II's reign. These include the campaign to subdue the Kikuyu ethnic group in Kenya by removing its members from the best farmland in the country and confining more than a million people to "the largest archipelago of detention and prison camps in the history of Britain's empire."

What is most eye-opening about Elkins's new work is the convincing way she shows that measures such as these in Kenya were the fruit of a long period of experimentation in methods of brutal repression, often involving the same colonial officials who moved about from one imperial hotspot to another during the late-19th and 20th centuries—India, Jamaica, South Africa, Palestine, British Malaya, Cyprus, the colony of Aden in present-day Yemen, and many others—innovating and fine-tuning their techniques based on the use of violence, torture, and the criminalization of resistance in ways that echo the steady improvement of the Portuguese plantation model based on chattel slavery as it migrated from São Tomé to Brazil and from there northward through the arc of the Caribbean and into the American South.

It is true, of course, that—as many of her admirers say—Elizabeth, unlike the first English queen to bear this name, had no power over affairs of state. In her many travels though, she incarnated and ably helped sell her nation and its system while never criticizing or apologizing for any aspect of its past. It is also true that the world became almost completely decolonized during Elizabeth II's time on the throne and that a great many of the former colonies have become democracies, which to one degree or another take seriously the rights of their citizens.

But it is long past the time when the world should pretend that this is because British rule was benign or that the rights of London's imperial subjects had much of anything to do with what "empire" was really about.

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