H-France Review Vol. 19 (October 2019), No. 214

Robert Gildea, *Empires of the Mind: The Colonial Past and the Politics of the Present.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. viii + 358 pp. Illustrations. $ 24.95. ISBN 978-1107159587.

Review by Alice Conklin, Ohio State University.

Robert Gildea, one of the most distinguished historians of modern France, has produced a book with a slightly misleading title. The volume under review is in fact a "comparative and entangled history" of only two empires: those of France and Britain, past and present (p. 13). Empire, Gildea asserts at the outset, is "protean," and includes everything from formal overseas empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the European Union, la *francophonie*, *Françafrique*, the Commonwealth, the War on Terror, postcolonial immigration, and the Anglosphere (only a partial list). Gildea's title is borrowed from Winston Churchill, who told graduating seniors at Harvard in 1943 that "the empires of the future would be the empires of the mind." According to Gildea, Churchill in his rather enigmatic statement--after all, if empires are "universal" there can only be one of them--was envisaging not "armed titans at war with each other, but rather universal empires living in peace and harmony." Churchill got the future wrong but Gildea likes the phrase "empires of the mind," calling it "a fluid concept" that can be used "to explore how empire has been imagined, mythologised and contested" (p. 2). This is the task he sets himself in the pages that follow. The result is an ambitious and readable, but also at times frustrating, exploration of the many developments in the last two centuries that the author insists upon linking together. Part of the problem is that a "protean" definition of empire ignores the more recent histories that complicate our understanding of how actual empires worked unevenly on the ground and their multi-faceted processes of decolonization, most notably Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's *Empires in World History.*[1] In many ways, Gildea's subtitle captures his real object of inquiry: the colonial past and the politics of the present, particularly in the UK. One of the chief merits of the book is to update older comparative histories of the British and French empires, and their dissolutions, by extending the story beyond formal decolonization to the current age of globalization. Gildea's principal interest is how France and Britain have reacted politically to the piecemeal loss of their colonies since 1947 in a constantly changing international context. He concludes that while an imperial revival is in full swing in Britain, in the form of nostalgia, racism, and pro-Brexit sentiment, France under Macron is confronting the painful legacies of its imperial past. Comparisons, however, can illuminate and obscure in equal measure. For much of the book, Gildea chooses to highlight similarities between these two Western European empires despite their different scales and power. This approach allows him to debunk myths about French or British exceptionalism, should any serious scholar still harbor them. But it makes it harder--at least for the uninitiated--to understand why France and Britain have sometimes behaved so

differently since 1950. Happily, the keys for unlocking this particular puzzle are hidden in plain sight along the way.

Empires of the Mind is organized both chronologically and thematically, and its ten chapters span the period from the late eighteenth century through 2018. It begins with two synthetic chapters narrating the violent conquest of overseas colonies in Asia, Africa and Oceania, subsequent forms of administration/settlement adopted by the two metropoles, and the apparent weakening of these empires during World War II. These rather dry chapters are not meant to be original, but to anchor for non-specialists what is the real thesis of the book: the persistence of empire, real and imagined, as well as resistance to it, after 1945. In the wake of World War II, victorious Britain and humiliated France clung to their beleaguered empires as the primary foundation of great power status in the looming Cold War. Chapters three and four, which cover decolonization, neo-colonialism, and the emergence of a new global empire from the 1940s to the 1990s, argue that both empires initially met anti-colonial movements with various combinations of force, investment, and reform, in a bid to reoccupy the parts that threatened to spin off. The losses of India and Vietnam only led to further bloody wars in Kenya, Southern Africa, Cyprus, Algeria, and the Middle East. In sum, neither France nor Britain exited formal empire peacefully, and the struggle was particularly vicious and prolonged in settlement colonies where white minorities clung to their privileges. In tandem with these brutal endgames both powers succeeded in finding neo-colonial alternatives that retained "the strings of economic and military power" in their own hands (p. 3)--although their strategies for doing so could vary tremendously.

For Gildea, the bungled Anglo-French-Israeli attempt to invade Egypt and topple Nasser in 1956, known as the Suez debacle, marked a major turning point because of the different lessons drawn from it by Britain and France in their search to secure their strategic and economic interests in the newly independent states they had once ruled. With the Suez lifeline to what remained of the Empire now gone, "Britain parted company with much of the Commonwealth, led by India" (p. 90) and began throwing its lot in with the United States. A special relationship here would best defend British investments in and trade with South Africa, its naval route around the Cape, and its valuable oil interests in the Middle East. Proof of this return to informal empire under the American umbrella was Britain's initial refusal to join the nascent European Economic Community then reluctant adherence to it sixteen years later. When Britain did join the EEC in 1973, Gildea insists, "the success felt like a defeat. It had swapped a world empire for membership of a European empire that was controlled by France and then, after reunification in 1990, of Germany. One felt like a bad rerun of the Napoleonic Wars, the other like a repeat of the Second World War that ended in defeat" (pp. 6, 106). How helpful, this reader has to ask, is the use of the word "empire" to describe the EEC or the ensuing EU?

Post-Suez France, as the above quote suggests, read the tea leaves differently. As violence reached new heights in Algeria, French leaders also came to accept that future strength lay first in dominating the emerging European Union, and second, in protecting what was left of its empire--principally the former colonies in West and Central Africa--by adopting the corrupt neo-colonial system known as *Françafrique*. The essence of this system was "cronyism, bribery, and bullying," backed up by force when necessary (p. 103); Gildea does not discuss whether the preservation of the CFA franc after decolonization, first introduced in 1945 and pegged to French currency, was also neo-colonial. Thatcher's Falklands War (1982) and Chirac's brutal suppression of Kanak militants (1984-1988) in New Caledonia are best understood as exercises

both in naked colonial brutality and neo-colonial strong arm tactics; in each case fantasies of former imperial grandeur briefly brought back the worst excesses of old albeit with different political outcomes (Thatcher's popularity rose; Chirac lost the next elections and today the New Caledonia question remains open). With the end of the Cold War and the triumph of neo-liberalism, however, a new kind of empire--a global financial one dominated by the US--rendered violence on the ground mostly unnecessary. Economic institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF could now leverage debt in developing nations to extract indirectly the same kind of resources and cheap labor that earlier British and French imperialists had once directly coerced. This latest incarnation of empire is one of several "empires of the mind" that rule our unhappy present.

Having explored in chapters one through four the formal projection of French and British power overseas, and hinted at multiple imperial afterlives of the mind, Gildea switches in chapters five through ten to a sustained analysis of more indirect forms of empire, and resistance to them from the era of decolonization onward. Here the overarching argument is that the reinvented imperialism of a neoliberal globalizing West soon collided with a new form of anti-imperialism that it could not contain "by financial measures alone" (p. 120); that of political Islam. In these chapters, too, certain themes dominate that suggest that the French and British experiences are more similar than different. Chapter five establishes that the intense discrimination and police brutality that Algerians encountered in France from World War I on become worse in the final paroxysms of the Algerian war; Britain experienced race riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill ten years after the first Jamaicans arrived on the Windrush in 1948, and every day racism soon set in. Desperate for cheap labor to rebuild after World War II, France and Britain supported the arrival of colonial subjects on metropolitan soil, only later to restrict their flow. And while Mitterrand's Socialist government and Thatcher's Conservative one in the 1980s acknowledged the need to recognize the multicultural societies that their countries had become due to earlier open door policies, the price they paid was the return of colonialist attitudes and populist politicians "who linked loss of empire to immigration from former colonies" (p. 143). In one domain though--that of the European project, the subject of chapter six--the two countries again parted ways from the 1950s to the 1990s. If French presidents swallowed (led?) European integration, Euroscepticism in Britain kept growing for reasons that Gildea brings back to empire, or more precisely, imperial nostalgia and distorted memories of the Raj. As for UKIP members now arriving on the political scene, "Britain's calling historically had been outside Europe, a Greater Britain of white Dominions and an empire stretching from the Caribbean to India" (p. 157). They thus began peddling the fantasy that a postcolonial global Britain, bolstered by its special relationship to the United States, could rise again.

Chapter seven argues that in 1979 the Iranian Revolution and Afghan resistance to the Soviet invasion coupled with the end of the Cold War provoked yet another phase of "neo-imperialism" (p. 158) by Western powers, in which their colonial pasts featured front and center. The results in France and Britain in the 1990s were growing Islamophobia and monocultural nationalism centrally concerned with identity. In France the resurgence of painful memories surrounding the use of torture in the Algerian War produced debate and division at a time when leftist intellectuals and *lepéniste* nationalists alike were insisting--albeit for different reasons--that headscarves could not be allowed in public schools. The secular republic and "France for the French" became competing national myths that excluded Muslims as other in equal measure. In Britain monocultural nationalism took the form of a nostalgic

replay of "standing alone" in the Second World War on the one hand, and a backwards-looking cult of beneficent imperialism on the other hand, especially in India. As proof, Gildea cites the phenomenal success of Paul Scott's *Jewel in the Crown* quartet in 1984 and its numerous spin-offs (p. 168); this claim is rather puzzling, since Scott's novels were hardly a varnished view of empire. In Britain, debates over colonial crimes were not even on the radar. Despite these differences, both British and French "national narratives of empires and wars" divided "the generation of young immigrants born around 1970" (p. 168) from their "host countries;" one ghastly long-term result of this postwar reinscription of colonial hierarchies "at home," now that the international context was changing again, was the radicalization of a tiny minority of Muslims born in Europe.

The final three chapters are devoted to the fallout from 9/11. The United States and its loyal British ally (along with others) launched the global War on Terror against Al Qaeda, which as Abu Ghraib showed was old-fashioned imperialism by another name. France may have resisted joining the coalition, but it chose to use the moment to flex its neo-imperial muscle to remove President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power in Haiti; "just as Toussaint had been captured to die in France, Aristide was kidnapped and flown to the Central African Republic" (p. 195). In the wake of 9/11 the "colonial fracture" deepened, as measured among other things by new laws against the Muslim headscarf, the emergence of *les indigènes de la république*, Niall Ferguson's paeans to Empire, and the murderous 2005 London underground attacks. Austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown emboldened politicians to beguile their voters into blaming Muslims, migrants and the European Union rather than the global financial empire for their pain. When the Empire struck back (and here Empire refers capaciously to Salafist fighters abroad, suburban riots in run-down British cities, all Islamist attacks since 2005 in both countries, advocates of multi-culturalism, and the wave of refugees from Syria), Britain and France pulled up "the drawbridge against immigration," further tightened security and redrew "the boundaries around national identity even more tightly" (p. 237).

The book closes with an extended interpretation of what a Brexit vote in 2016 and Emmanuel Macron's victory over Marine Le Pen can tell us about French and British attitudes toward empire at the time this book went to press. Some Conservatives told voters that, thanks to its ties with the Commonwealth, Britain could once again become a great global trading nation if only it abandoned the ruinous European partnership. This conjuring up of the old British Empire dubbed the Anglosphere is, for Gildea, "a pure fantasy" that seeks "to cover the country's international weakness and isolation" (p. 247). The French president too resurrected empire but in a multilateralist and internationalist key. For Europe, Macron suggested a return to both Napoleon's inner core and outer zone and Robert Schuman's original vision of Europe of Six; for Africa, he has promised transparency, investment in female education, and measures to combat political Islam locally; and in the world at large he is reviving a "soft power" approach through renewed support for *la francophonie*.

There is much that is impressive about this book. Its range is sweeping without sacrificing detail, to which my cursory summary cannot possibly do justice. Gildea, as he has shown in his other synthetic works, is a master at both summarizing a dense body of secondary literature and combining it with his own research to produce insights and connections that more specialized histories miss. In this case, he is at his most original in tracking high politics simultaneously in both countries, and contemporary Britain suffers in the comparison. It is not

that Gildea cuts France some slack for its imperial "fantasy of glory and chronicle of anguish" (p. 255): France and Britain committed similar horrific crimes first overseas and then at home, both are facing blowback from political Islam, and both need to work through their colonial pasts if Europe is to move forward and treat all citizens equally. But Britain comes in for special opprobrium for drawing the worst possible lesson from its former stint as a world hegemon; reviving *la francophonie* as a strategy for projecting influence in the world seems a much better bet--and a much more benign enterprise--than little England going it alone in a world dominated by a global financial empire it spawned long ago but no longer controls.

As noted at the outset of this review, I do have a number of reservations. Gildea could have gone farther in accounting for the different choices of his two principal actors. Not surprisingly given the content of current British nationalism, and for an historian who has produced field-defining monographs on the French Resistance, France and Britain's different experiences of war, both Napoleonic and World War II, loom in Gildea's explanation of why the two countries are diverging at present. Yet surely another reason is that modern Britain continuously celebrated its vast empire in ways that France never did, not least because astoundingly Britain ruled one quarter of the world's population at its apex (400 million roughly to France's 100 million). This proverbial French "indifference" to empire was due on some basic level to the fact that their colonies generated far fewer resources over considerably less time for the metropole than those of their island rival. Where Britain's vast empire destroyed India's textile manufacture, produced remittances that powered industrialization, and sustained a string of white Dominions that also constituted a "lifeline" to the very real financial empire of the UK, the economic and emigration history of France's empire has yet to be written. Gildea hints at this obvious difference in the scale and nature of these two empires, but never spells it out. One result is that his vision of the French empire as one commensurate with that of Britain at times feels forced. The French neo-colonial policy known as *Françafrique* is a case in point. It is supposed to be the equivalent of neo-colonial Britain protecting its many real assets, all named. But unlike in the case of Britain we are never told exactly what France's strategic and economic interests are in the parts of West Africa that *la grande nation* grabbed long ago.

A second quibble concerns Gildea's decision to make political Islam the "only" form of resistance that has recently stood up successfully to the West--in the sense of pushing the latter to deploy boots on the ground. This internationalist view reduces the experience of empire, especially in the French case, to their former Muslim subjects and their descendants alone. Indeed Algeria (arguably the anomaly in the French "crown") is treated as France's most emblematic experience of real and imagined empire in *Empires of the Mind*. Early on Gildea qualifies Algeria as "a hybrid between India and Canada" (p. 24). That is to say, it combined in one relatively small territory the two kinds of vicious administration that prevailed in the much vaster, much more densely populated British Empire: military then civil service despotism on the one hand (which was how the British ruled India), settler despotism on the other (which was how Britain ruled its white settlement colonies, from Canada to New Zealand, Australia, Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa). Gildea's reductiveness in the French case helps make the two empires on the ground seem similar, or more similar than different, especially over the *longue durée*. But it also matters that other painful postcolonial exclusions and forms of resistance--particularly those of black French men and women combating racism--receive considerably less attention in these pages.

A related point has to do with a larger problem of nomenclature /"naming" throughout a volume which uses the term empire so broadly. Although Gildea valiantly tries to keep all of the proverbial balls that he is juggling in the air--empire, imperialism, colonialism, neo-imperialism, neo-colonialism, informal empire, global trading empire--none of these terms is defined at first usage so that they tend to blur together. Many of the chapter titles and sub-titles are part of the problem. "Neo-Colonialism Again: Falklands and New Caledonia": in what sense is the Falkland fiasco remotely neo-colonial, given that Britain has minimal economic interests there (p. 111)? When he calls chapter nine "The Empire Strikes Back," does he mean that both ISIS and French and British Muslims who condemn it are part of the same empire? Equally slippery--although Gildea is hardly the only scholar facing this dilemma--is knowing when and how to use the term "immigrant" to designate British and French citizens who do not see themselves in these terms. When can a person whose grandparents were Jamaican but for whom Britain is their only home stop being called an immigrant? Why can some people today only ever be defined according to some distant family relationship to "empire," rather than to the more important and immediate circumstances in which they live? I wish Gildea had acknowledged the unintentional danger that historians can run of replicating the discourse of the very groups they wish to criticize. And how does identifying political Islam as the one successful anti-imperialism avoid the trap of indirectly justifying the shrill anti-Muslim rhetoric of the monocultural nationalists? Finally, and tellingly, both an earlier generation of Africanists and the entire cohort of "new colonial historians" now in their forties in French universities will be surprised to read that the French academy is still by and large defending the colonial enterprise (p. 198).

Short books on empires--which this one is--and even long ones are confronted inevitably with what to include and what to leave out. Gildea makes it quite clear from the outset what his choices are. There is no doubt that the book displays an extraordinary breadth in navigating how certain global flows of power have been "imagined, mythologised and contested" in the past two centuries--although much of what he chronicles about France will be familiar to specialists in that field. Yet the many ways in which one can define empire means that there are as many ways to write its history. For several decades, historians of French and British colonialism and racism have been concerned with documenting the political possibilities that empires not only closed down but also occasionally opened up for all those living within their boundaries. Gildea seems less interested in embracing this perspective than combating the defenders of empire today. In this sense, the book feels more like a reflection of our current political moment than an exploration of the two largest European empires, real or imagined.

NOTES

[1] Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). For an excellent overview of the literature on the end of empire globally in the twentieth century, see Jan C. Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel's *Decolonization: A Short History* trans. Jeremiah Reimer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Alice Conklin
Ohio State University
Conklin44@osu.edu

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172