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**Review by Brett Bebber, Old Dominion University**

British journalist Sathnam Sanghera originally published *Empireland* with Penguin Press in the UK in 2021 amidst ongoing debates about monuments to slaveowners in the UK and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. The central focus of the book is how empire has shaped contemporary Britain, and he laments that many Britons will not recognize, teach, or contend with the inheritances of empire in their midst. The timing of the publication was both unintended and fortuitous, he contends, because he had been researching the book since his participation in a British television documentary about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, which saw peaceful pro-independence crowds shot by the British Indian Army. This edition, which was published for an American audience by Pantheon Books, includes a substantial “Note to the American Reader” as well as a supplementary interview with the author. The additional material explains the controversies the book both outlines and contributes to, as its publication has launched quite a storm. Sanghera himself has essentially stopped events promoting his book. Within Britain, Sanghera is the target of online and in-person abuse by the defenders of empire, the very people he hoped to engage with the volume.¹ His forthcoming *Empireworld: How British Imperialism Has Shaped the Globe* offers a more wide-ranging assessment of imperial legacy.²

Alongside its deliberate provocation to residents of the right who defend Britain’s imperial past, the book is an entertaining, accessible, and popular work on the impact of empire on domestic Britain. A helpful forward by novelist Marlon James points out that the book undermines other questionable approaches in the canon of empire surveys, including those by Jan Morris’s *Pax Britannica* trilogy and Niall Ferguson’s contested volume.³ But James rightly acknowledges that Sanghera’s tone is one of discovery and engagement rather than accusatory or didactic. Throughout the book, Sanghera reveals how he learned about Britain’s imperial past. As a British Sikh from Wolverhampton, educated at fee-paying primary schools and the University of Cambridge, he marvels at how remarkably absent histories of imperialism and colonialism were in his curriculums, including those about India. In fact, despite the book’s multiple subthemes and argumentative directions, Sanghera ultimately hopes that his audience will learn about Britain’s imperial past, either through curriculum revision, activism, or engagement in contemporary British politics. As a journalist, Sanghera also recounts his earlier assignments to recount his journey of self-exploration through travel and discovery.

Individual chapters on debates about the provenance of items in British museums, migration and emigration in the empire, contemporary discussions of multiculturalism, imperial nostalgia, and how slavery made many British families wealthy structure the book’s investigative tone. The chapters are organized around concrete topics, which are short and readable, and yet interspersed with the author’s own memories and tangential narratives. Sanghera states from the beginning that he is not interested in offering a dense historical tome. Yet, he takes on more topics than most historians would dare to try to synthesize in academic monographs, as they would inevitably be enmeshed in tense debates and exceedingly long footnotes. He includes references to some of the ever-expanding literature on many of these topics, but privileges breadth and a focus on the present impact of empire rather than historical analysis.

To wit, the third chapter, entitled “Difficult History,” offers a brief on British imperial historians and their work before discussing imperial legacy. The chapter feels unsatisfactory to this historian, but briefly summarizes many of the appraisals central to imperial and colonial history. Sanghera demonstrates that each colony had a different relationship with domestic Britain, and notes that classic works in the field debate its influence on the metropole. He argues that each territory developed variegated cultures of power and integration. He notes that “the empire was never unanimous” (39) and that not a single phase or place in the empire evaded criticism. His most unremarkable pronouncements in this chapter are that disagreements remain about what the empire means to Britain, and that no monolithic, centralized motivation existed for British expansion. But to his credit, Sanghera’s volume is meant to address an audience that knows little about the history of Britain’s empire. Rather than take sides, Sanghera sets out the contours of these debates in order to establish how contentious the histories of empire can be. Throughout he maintains a critical approach that emphasizes the brutality of British imperial presence and the ramshackle and chaotic nature of its development.

Sanghera’s personal revelations and often vulnerable tone are welcome. One would hope that when an author openly reveals the lacunae in his educational background and historical awareness the response would be a helpful conversation rather than abusive responses. The author’s editorializing is calculated and balanced, and he conveys his genuine surprise at what stories of imperial exploitation and violence a well-educated British-born person simply did not learn. Chapter 2, entitled “Imperialism and Me,” begins with Sanghera’s visit to Amritsar to learn about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre almost exactly a century after the event. He toured the region with historian Kim Wagner and visited gurdwaras (a place of assembly and worship for Sikhs) and memorials dedicated to Sikh bravery. He writes that his initial impressions that “Sikhs were generally respected by the British” (17) and that “it seems the Sikhs did relatively well out of empire” (18) were certainly partial and misguided. As the chapter continues, Sanghera outlines the brutally violent episode and the early Anglo-Sikh wars of the late nineteenth century. His contemplations on British identity and history are problematized, and he outlines his own points of reconsideration. He concludes that “my investigation into [Jallianwala Bagh] leaves me as depressed about British-Sikh relations as the Saragarhi memorial had made me feel uplifted about them” (21). Beyond this admission, Sanghera details his surprise at discovering Heather Streets’s excellent history of how the British imagined Sikhs in their theories of “martial races” and revisits the dehumanization, discrimination, and violence that South Asians were subjected to in his native Wolverhampton in the 1960s and 1970s. The chapter is impressive in large part because of the way in which Sanghera draws the reader into his own process of exploring previous historical absences, a practice he hopes other Britons might emulate.

In an introductory note for his American audience, Sanghera explains the political fractures that entrench many people’s unwillingness to account for the shadows of empire in both Britain and America. “To

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understand American history, you must also first understand British imperial history,” he suggests (xx). Though American narratives stress the country’s early victimization by its British imperial overlords and the founders as the epitome of anti-imperial resistance, Sanghera intimates that the United States maintains the same expressions of a racist world order that were fashioned in the eighteenth and nineteenth century British empire. Many historical parallels emerge: both nations struggle to integrate slavery into contemporary education, both embraced the logic of Western imperialism, both brag about a “special relationship” (xx) that has helped to maintain their geopolitical position as global arbiters, and both renounce the impact of imperialism on contemporary life. Despite this denial, both have recently gone through a historical reckoning with race through the Black Lives Matters movement and the contests over memorials and monuments. As a result, political rhetoric about race, slavery, and empire has elevated the role of history in the political consciousness of both Britain and America.

Some of the sourcing and the style of synthesis in the book are not that of an academic monograph: much of the quotable material is taken from contemporary journalism, though the author does well to include much of the relevant work on the domestic impact of empire in Britain. And yet, some quotations are not cited fully and the citation method is at times spotty. In particular, news articles and online journalism are often cited on certain topics when full historical investigations have been conducted by other professional historians. But it might be best to read this book as a popular rejoinder to those who champion the empire in British history. In this regard, Sanghera joins Kwasi Kwarteng, Shashi Tharoor, Peter Mitchell, Caroline Elkins, and others who are building a framework to engage the public and force a reconsideration of the collective amnesia about the nastier moments of the British past.

Readers looking to investigate British Conservative culture wars and the mindsets of right-wing ministers who engage in contemporary diplomacy will find plenty of relevant material here. Diplomatic historians can also see an overview of the thinking of former British imperialists and their actions, especially from the late Victorian period to World War II. Many American readers can review Sanghera’s parallels to American battles over wokeness, difficulties in including slavery and racism in education curriculums, and the overlapping valences of race, activism, and politics that permeate both British and American discussions of their national mythologies. Chapter 12, which serves as something of a conclusion, delineates Britain’s political fractures about its most troubling imperial legacies and the paradigm of British exceptionalism that reigns despite its declining geopolitical position in the postwar era. It notes that culture wars over empire are not new, but seem to have an elevated importance among a younger generation. In the end, Sanghera suggests that readers should capitalize on the interest of youth in learning about the imperial past and teach its history to them, warts and all.

Brett Bebber is Associate Professor of History at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. His research explores class and racial conflict in leisure, popular culture, public space, and other sites of social life in modern Britain and the British Empire. He is the author of Violence and Racism in Football: Politics and Cultural Conflict in British Society, 1968–1998 (Pickering and Chatto, 2012) and the editor of Leisure and Cultural Conflict in Twentieth-Century Britain (Manchester University Press, 2012) and A Cultural History of Leisure in the Modern Age. Some of his current research on race relations organizations has been published in The Journal of Social History, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, and The Journal of Civil and Human Rights in recent years.

For example, see the discussion on virginity tests for female migrants on p. 25, explored elsewhere in Evan Smith and Marinella Marmo, Race, Gender and the Body in British Immigration Control (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).