



## Cities of Empire: The British Colonies and the Creation of the Urban World

*Tristram Hunt*

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**Cities of Empire: The British Colonies and the Creation of the Urban World** Tristram Hunt  
An original history of the most enduring colonial creation, the city, explored through ten portraits of powerful urban centers the British Empire left in its wake

At its peak, the British Empire was an urban civilization of epic proportions, leaving behind a network of cities which now stand as the economic and cultural powerhouses of the twenty-first century. In a series of ten vibrant urban biographies that stretch from the shores of Puritan Boston to Dublin, Hong Kong, New Delhi, Liverpool, and beyond, acclaimed historian Tristram Hunt demonstrates that urbanism is in fact the most lasting of Britain's imperial legacies.

Combining historical scholarship, cultural criticism, and personal reportage, Hunt offers a new history of empire, excavated from architecture and infrastructure, from housing and hospitals, sewers and statues, prisons and palaces. Avoiding the binary verdict of empire as "good" or "bad," he traces the collaboration of cultures and traditions that produced these influential urban centers, the work of an army of administrators, officers, entrepreneurs, slaves, and renegades. In these ten cities, Hunt shows, we also see the changing faces of British colonial settlement: a haven for religious dissenters, a lucrative slave-trading post, a center of global hegemony.

Lively, authoritative, and eye-opening, *Cities of Empire* makes a crucial new contribution to the history of colonialism.

## Cities of Empire: The British Colonies and the Creation of the Urban World Details

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Author : Tristram Hunt

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## From Reader Review Cities of Empire: The British Colonies and the Creation of the Urban World for online ebook

### Sy says

Tristram Hunt is the epitome of a 'cuckservative' through this disappointing, self-flagellating account of Empire. He lavishes innumerable disparaging passages about British colonialism upon the reader in a repugnantly smug prose; all the while adroitly skirting the benefits it brought, lest he be deemed a nationalist.

Hunt revels in his illustrations of the pallid-faced, imperious generals and their frivolous wives enjoying decadence in India, but noticeably withholds the same level of detail in his description, and condemnation of barbarous Indian practices that the British abolished - such as 'sootie' where the widow of her deceased husband was ritualistically burnt alive in public. Moreover, advancements in medicine that doubled life expectancy or transport that brought huge economic gains to the colonies are stated in a matter-of-fact way, he reserves the emotional rhetoric to embellish points that he feels the reader should pay greater heed: that is the consistent and overwhelmingly negative accounts of Empire.

Hunt earnestly wants to imbue readers with the notion that British colonialism was the most iniquitous scourge to ever afflict humanity. It beggars belief that he sits amid the conservative benches in the House of Commons in his straight-laced, Saville Row sartorial best. I feel he'd be better suited to a purple 'bed-head' spike-cut, his flesh adorned with rainbow LGBT tattoos, and a provocative t-shirt denouncing the patriarchy. Personally, I am glad so called 'conservatives' write books like this - as they reveal they are anything but. I would not want to give my vote to a party made up of duplicitous MPs such as Hunt who evidently hold a vehement hatred for my country and have sold out to liberal masochism. I for one am tired of all the iconoclasm, and if like me, you love Great Britain and are proud of the many good things we as a nation have contributed to the world; you won't read this book.

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### Sophie says

Really enjoyed it. Maybe a bit too broad-ranging (or not comprehensive enough) to be any general history of the British empire but a good cross-section underlining the rise and fall of empire and that now it's the turn of China.

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### Arif Khwaja says

An amazing read... An outstanding story of empire through the fabric of 10 cities... Starts with the Boston Tea Party and ends with the national reaction to the Hillsborough disaster - if only they taught history at school like this...

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### Leah says

**The sun never sets...**

*After sporting pastimes and the English language (to which might be added Anglicism, the parliamentary system and Common Law), Jan Morris has described urbanism as ‘the most lasting of the British imperial legacies’.*

Tristram Hunt, historian and Member of (the British) Parliament, has chosen an innovative way to look at the history and legacy of the British Empire by considering ten of the cities that played important roles in the two centuries when the Empire was at its height. There can be a tendency to think that the Empire came into being at some defined point, existed for a while, and then ceased. Hunt’s city tour gives a much clearer picture of how the Empire was always evolving, always changing, as global events raised and lowered the importance of products and markets – and he makes it very clear that the Empire’s primary purpose was indeed economic rather than political, at least initially. Hunt admits that there were many other cities with as good a claim to be included as the ones he chose, but his purpose is to show how the Empire shifted geographically and politically over time and his choices work well for this purpose.

Starting with Boston, Hunt sets the pattern he subsequently follows with each city. He gives the reasons for the city’s founding (or colonisation if it already existed), explains its importance to the development of the Empire, describes the culture of the society and discusses how the city developed physically in terms of its architecture and industrial or trading infrastructure.

The book is not immensely long, so each city only gets around forty pages. This is long enough to give a reasonable overview of the city’s place within the Empire, but clearly Hunt has had to set himself some limitations to keep the length down. The major limitation for me was that he only told us about each city at the point that it was at its height in terms of Empire. As the Empire rolled on and away, we aren’t given much feel for what happened to the cities afterwards. This is truer of the early cities more than the late ones – Boston is more or less dropped at the point of Independence while the current political situation of Hong Kong is briefly discussed. At first, I found this abrupt departure from each city very disconcerting, but as the book went on it became clear that Hunt was portraying the Empire like a wave or perhaps a bandwagon that rolled into town, changed everything, and then rolled on. I found that in the end it did give me a much clearer picture of how all the various geographic bits fitted in at different points in history.

So from America, Hunt takes us to the West Indies, stops off in Dublin, and then heads east – to Africa, China and, of course, India. India’s importance to the Empire is indicated by the fact that three of its cities are covered – Calcutta, Bombay and New Delhi, showing how the Empire in India developed from an initial trading zone to the full scale colonial undertaking it eventually became before gaining independence. Hunt balances the book well between the colonies and the Dominions, showing how the Dominions were seen as a means of disseminating British values and of building an interconnected anglicised world that would come to the support of the mother-country in times of need (as indeed they did in both WW1 and WW2). He finishes off with a look at Liverpool, the only British city to merit a chapter, showing its importance as a trading hub under the Empire and discussing the economically devastating effects, still being dealt with today, of the end of Empire.

While I was glad that the book was kept down to a reasonable length, I’d have liked to learn more about what happened to the cities post-Empire, and I’d have been happy to sacrifice some of the architectural detail to make way for that. However, I think that’s probably more a matter of personal preference than a criticism. All-in-all, I found this an interesting and well written read that took an innovative approach to telling the much-told story of the Empire, and recommend it to anyone interested in knowing more about how the Empire worked. I read an advance copy of the book, so can’t comment on the illustrations, but I believe there are over forty colour plates plus maps in the final copy, which I imagine would greatly enhance the

enjoyment of the book.

The Ten Cities are: Boston, Bridgetown, Dublin, Cape Town, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Bombay, Melbourne, New Delhi, Liverpool.

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Penguin Books (UK).

[www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com](http://www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com)

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### **Alistair says**

I found this very enlightening and a fascinating snapshot of the cities during Britain@'s Empire building.I found Dublin , Liverpool and Bombay the best and the coverage of each city is variable I suppose depending on their situation and importance .

Being a middle of the road labour MP, Tristram Hunt leans a bit towards anti colonialism but steers an even handed path through a difficult subject . There are nice maps and photos old and new .

It is easy to read and would make a good TV series as long as it isn't presented by Billy Connolly or Stephen Fry .

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### **Reza Amiri Praramadhan says**

In this book, we follow the rise and fall of British Empire, seen through ten cities:

Boston: One of the earliest British colonies, which ended up being the hotbed for one of the biggest (and successful) rebellion against British Empire, forcing it to shift its attention anywhere else.

Bridgetown: A place where the British retreated from its thirteen colonies, consolidating its power among the sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

Dublin: Mired in bog, and filled with Catholics with rebellious tendencies, the British came to identify Dublin as part of its empire (along with the Anglicization of Irishmen).

Cape Town: the gateway to the Orient, grabbed from the hand of the Dutch, thus the British settlers and traders had to contend living with grumbling Boers.

Calcutta: First only functioned as the base for East India Company's Indian operation, Calcutta became a place where the British exuded its might, especially militarily.

Hong Kong: A tiny, rocky island which bore witness to the decline of East India Company and the emergence of free trade regime, also featuring the countless number of missionaries and the opium war.

Bombay: A cosmopolitan where the British tried another tack of showcasing its power through the great numbers of civil projects, fuelled by merchant-princes.

Melbourne: The settlers and former convicts spread out and forming a suburban civilisation in the Land Down Under.

New Delhi: A place of Indian imperial past where the British tried to reassert its imperial authority through many touches of triumphalism, also the place where the British Empire began to unravel.

Liverpool: The dock city which prospered under the British Imperialism, the end of it spelt the end of Liverpool's glory, symbolised with the closing of Tate & Lyle, that great sugar refinery, because of the entrance of United Kingdom to European Economic Community flooded the sugar market with cheaper sugar beets.

All in all, I found the journey quite fascinating, the lesson learnt from this book would be, even the greatest Empire would fall. Despite the aura of permanence, nothing lasts forever, even British Empire.

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### **BooksFreshair (Poornima Apte) says**

<http://booksnfreshair.blogspot.com/20...>

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### **David says**

I came across this wonderful volume which had accidentally misplaced among the "New Releases, Fiction" rack at the library. Snatching it up, I was immediately intrigued. Ten cities of the British Empire are examined as to their individual history, purposes and evolution. The flow of commercial as well as political interests, influences of native populations and politics and the individual personalities who left their imprint on these major urban centers spread across every continent except South America and Antarctica.

There are ample excerpts from historical sources to give a sense of the complexity of opinion concerning these centers of British Imperial influence and how they have shaped the modern world, as well as Britain itself.

I did learn quite a bit from this book, and had to go running to look up quite a few side paths that sparked my interest. For instance, the fact that Cornwallis went on after his defeat at Yorktown to become Governor-General of the East India Company's interests in India, succeeding another famous military man, Arthur Wellesley--Duke of Wellington--the same who had defeated Napoleon at Waterloo and was recalled as Governor-General. If that had not been enough, I was surprised to learn that the son of Edward Bulwer-Lytton (author of such famous works as **Paul Cifford** and those opening words, "It was a dark and stormy night...", became Viceroy of India (notice how the name of the position had changed).

I thoroughly enjoyed this read, especially when he concluded with a wonderful quote from one of my favorite authors, Joseph Conrad--Empire 'is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much'.

Perhaps there will one day be such a focused examination of American Imperialism--but alas ours will not have cities to mark its passing.

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### **Kieran Hamilton says**

Hunt excels at getting past the usual tropes - from the right or the left of the political spectrum - that surround the British Empire and its key cities by expertly conveying subtleties and complexities that are often ignored or go unacknowledged in standard accounts. As someone on the left this was an excellent read that challenged some of my assumptions and beliefs about the British Empire, while at the same time bringing a degree of realistic detail (not always found in historical texts) that allows the reader to fully grasp the atmosphere of the times and places Hunt discusses. At times Hunt's writing flows so well you forget this is non-fiction, such is the way he tells the story of the British Empire, the impact of these ten cities and their people on that empire, and vice versa. An absolute must-read for anyone interested in British history or the

wider history of the world during that period.

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### **Jason Vanhee says**

Informative about some of the ten featured cities but diffuse and nearly formless when speaking about others, it feels as if some of the chosen were put there just to round out the total. The book's a bit obsessed with architectural details, which I understand because it's an import aspect of Imperialist policy, but which I find frankly boring.

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### **Andrew Ragland says**

An in-depth history of the British Empire through the rise and fall of its colonial cities, starting with pre-Revolutionary War Boston and wrapping with post-Empire Liverpool, this volume examines the process by which the British Empire grew, the anchors it required for its trade routes and politics, and the inevitable decline. At the beginning, Boston opens the ideas of transatlantic trade, of the vast wealth of raw resources in the Americas, Asia, and the Antipodes. Calcutta, Melbourne, Hong Kong all contribute to the progress of the Empire, at the cost of the native populations and the governments that were already in place in many of these locations. Empires are built of bone cemented with blood, and Hunt is unsparing in his reporting and assessment of the violence the British Empire has done to the world. In the end, Liverpool is portrayed as colonized in its own turn, bringing in China and India and their wealth and industry to revitalize a city left destitute by the collapse of British Imperial trade. The cycle turns, and the colonizer is itself colonized. Hunt makes considerable reference to primary sources, and provides an extensive bibliography, itself a resource for years of further study.

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### **Tawney says**

I received this book compliments of Metropolitan Books through the Goodreads First Reads program.

The British Empire was never a static entity and Tristram Hunt chronicles the major shifts of intent and implementation of colonialism from The Massachusetts Bay Company settling Boston in the mid-Seventeenth Century to the collapse of Liverpool's economy in the late Twentieth. He examines ten cities, each in the time it was of most importance to the politics and economics of Britain. Bridgetown, Barbados doesn't seem overly important today, but in the 1700s it was the center of trade in both slaves and sugar. This not only enriched many in England, it also changed their diet. Hong Kong is so dense in population and business that it seems it must be much more than 175 years old, but Western business still works to reach mainland Chinese consumers just as the British fought to open trade when they moved there. These are the sort of insights the author provides.

As each city came to importance it grew and so did the problems of infrastructure. Sanitation, drainage, roads, public buildings. The advanced reader's copy I read doesn't have the color plates, but the internet provided pictures of some of these buildings and it is fascinating to read the political intent in building the Viceroy's House in New Delhi. The social life of the elite, the racism, the economic disparities are also touched upon and the loyal Britishness of colonists who weren't born there. After the colonies gained independence the cities remained. Even though monuments are torn down, buildings

repurposed or demolished to make room for other buildings the heritage remains also.

This is not a fast read and without a basic knowledge of the history of the period it might sometimes be hard to follow, but it is well researched, well written and very interesting.

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### **DJ Roberto says**

Great informative entertaining read and I stress entertaining as in he doesn't delve too deeply into each city rather presents a travelogue as such through the prism of the British Empire and how it impacted on the subject matter. I kept thinking as I was reading it that it would make a good BBC Documentary in the vein of Simon Schama, Lucy Worsley as Hunt's style very much suits an informal audience but I must say being familiar with quite a few of the cities I thought he did them justice in terms of a good polaroid. My only criticism as such is he covered three cities in India when two I think would have sufficed at the expense of maybe two prime candidates to segue from Hong Kong (sic) - her fussier sister Singapore or perhaps Vancouver - that said there's no reason for Mr. Hunt not to write "Ten More Cities That Made an Empire" and I'd buy that too.

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### **Nicole says**

Well written and researched overview of ten cities of the British empire.

I was born in and have spent most of my life in one of these cities and I have spent time in six of the others so it was fascinating to get an insight into how Great Britain expanded its empire into those cities.

Although for me probably the most interesting chapters were the ones about Cape Town and Bridgetown as I previously knew nothing about those two cities.

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### **Raj says**

It appears that this book has taken me exactly five months to read. Not because it's difficult, or complex, or dull, but I just have trouble with non-fic, especially history. I tend to read a chunk, put it down, meaning to pick it up again the next day and get distracted by a graphic novel or space opera. Still, I'm very glad that I did eventually get through this book, which uses ten cities to provide a breakneck tour of the history of the British Empire, from its first phase in the Americas through its turn towards the east, and right down to its end and the impact on Britain itself.

It's an odd mix, but the architecture of the cities is only ever there in the background and never as important as you think it's going to be, but still, weaving together the history of the cities with the wider context of Empire is fascinating. I wasn't sure what to expect from Hunt, as he seems to be on the right wing of the Labour Party but his history seems balanced. He talks about how the British Empire alternated between waves of free trade imperialism and more traditional conquering imperialism, but is never flag-waving. He never shies away from the dark underbelly of the Empire, particularly the slavery that formed the basis of the West Indies economy for so long, and the racism that was evident in India (and elsewhere), compared with

the 'white colonies'.

My knowledge of the Empire has always been patchy, and this book has helped fill in some of those gaps, particularly the broad brush of its rise and fall across a few hundred years and its actions and behaviour in India. Indeed, the Indian chapters were amongst the most interesting for me, especially the comparison between Calcutta and Bombay (as they were then), with New Delhi being the Empire's last hurrah, despite the triumphalism that went into its building and its architecture.

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