Empire: What Ruling The World Did To The British By Jeremy Paxman

Reviewed by Ian Shields Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

Jeremy Paxman will be well known, and not only as a journalist, chairman of University Challenge, media face and feared inquisitor on Newsnight: He is no slouch as an author, primarily of political history. So to his latest work (building perhaps on some of his previous undertakings on The English, Royalty and the Victorians). This book, almost inevitably to accompany a television series is what one would expect from Mr Paxman: Witty, erudite and well-written. It traces the rise of the British Empire, making the points early on that it was never planned, it just happened, and that it was all about trade. His approach is sensible, following primarily an historic path, although he associates certain periods with certain regions – primarily India and then Africa. It is all done at a respectable pace, the entire book amounting to a little under 300 pages, plus notes.

There are a number of points to admire with this offering, especially the supporting illustrative tales, and the book has very clearly been well-researched (with Mr Paxman paying fulsome praise to his researcher and the team of assistants at various libraries and collections who supported him.) These anecdotes help bring the tale to life and many were new to me; they help keep the story moving. But – and it is large "but" – this is well-trodden ground. The story of the British Empire's rise and decline has been well told by historians and economists, by opponents, apologists and supporters of what the Empire did (or did not do) and it was this book's sub-title ("What Ruling The World Did To The British") that appeared to offer a different view, reversing the lens so to speak. Indeed, the introductory chapter does examine this aspect of the legacy of having had an Empire, and suggested an interesting read ahead. Thereafter, though, the book followed (albeit in an entertaining and easily read way) the standard history, with largely standard explanations and not once did it, directly or implied, appear to return to the sub-title and its text.

I can already see the subsequent television series in my mind: The BBC at its best with fantastic camera work, great images and the narrator flitting around the globe (at the licence-fee payer's expense of course!) to cram 500 years of history into a series that will dazzle and inform. But, if the book is a guide, it will do little to educate deeply, less to offer new analysis and less still to challenge perceived wisdom. This is a pleasant book that at a superficial level is an enjoyable read, and as a standard history of the British Empire is as good as most, and better than many, of its rivals. But it left me feeling cheated and wanting more, for it did not address the potentially fascinating sub-title and in the end was, as a result, disappointing.

I hold out little great expectations for the forthcoming television series beyond colourful, but unfulfilling, fare.