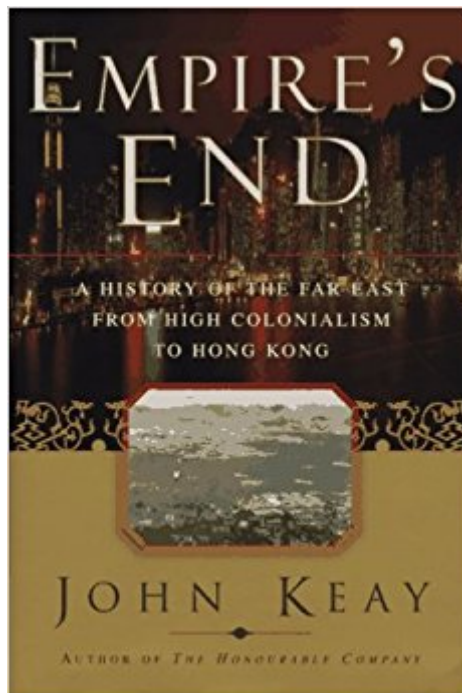


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EMPIRES END: A History Of The Far East From High Colonialism To Hong Kong



Synopsis

As the British prepare to disengage themselves from Hong Kong, a study of the involvement of Europe and America in the Far East explores more than five hundred years of Western colonial presence in Asia and speculates about the future of the region's political and economic geography. 15,000 first printing.

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Customer Reviews

On July 1, 1997, the last European-ruled province in Asia, Hong Kong, will revert to Chinese rule, marking the first time in 500 years that Europe did not have a colonial presence on the continent. During much of that five-century span, Keay writes, the European powers behaved rather badly far from home in the headlong rush to secure riches. The Asian nations took much time to respond, but when they did, Europe was sent reeling from much of the continent, especially after World War II when countries newly liberated from Japan decided not to accept another yoke. Keay takes on a huge subject and covers it well, at least in outline, in 400 pages. He raises enough questions, however, to send the reader on to many other books.

Keay (*The Honorable Company*, Macmillan, 1994) provides a solid overview of the British, French, Dutch, and American empires in the Far East, concentrating on the years after 1930. He examines the effects of the Pacific War on empire and on the emerging nationalistic movements. He also discusses the Vietnam War and insurgency movements and ends by speculating on the future of Hong Kong. "There seems to be a continuum in the history of the East," he explains, "to which, albeit for its own purposes, empire substantially contributed." A solid work; highly

At one time almost all of the countries of East Asia - over half of the world's population if one included India - were under varying degrees of colonial control by the nations of the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Some of these areas had been under imperial control for centuries, yet within a few decades of the end of World War II, all were to one degree or another independent. Parts of the Netherlands East Indies never saw Dutch rule reinstated after the war and those that did only experienced it for five trouble-filled years. France would hang on in Indo-China for only nine years and at the cost of incessant trouble in the south and a major war with the north. While the British in Malaya and Borneo did manage to put down an insurrection and restore economic prosperity, they too would be out within twelve years of the end of World War II. Was there any common denominator in the exodus of European colonial powers in East Asia? Author John Keay says that too many works have focused on one particular colonial power - generally the United Kingdom - and pegged all of the reasons for the end of empire to certain aspects of national politics, economics, and character. Keay has sought in this book to compare and contrast the Dutch, French, British, and American experiences in East Asia, to see if there were any common threads that lead to the rise of independent nations in the region. Keay found that all of the colonies were alike in learning first-hand that guaranteed prosperity under their distant imperial masters was at least partially mythic thanks to the worldwide depression of the 1930s as orders for colonial products disastrously declined and the average person in Asia could see that many Europeans were reduced to now unenviable standards of living. The myth of imperial invulnerability was shattered time and again by the incessant advance of Japanese forces in the early days of World War II, exposing to colonial subjects the lack of real imperial power, an absence that the colonial powers had tried to mask by informal and indirect rule and administrative flexibility. Any possible show of imperial force in retaking the colonies during the war evaporated with the sudden Japanese surrender following the atomic bombings; the colonies were simply reoccupied, not retaken, and the imperial powers were deprived of a "splendid spectacle" to help restore colonial prestige. Further, the author asserted that the Japanese occupation in World War II heightened Asian expectations of independence and gave many at least a passing acquaintance with self-rule despite the fact that the states the Japanese set up during their occupation were generally geared towards supporting their empire and thwarting the goals of the Allies rather than from any sense of benevolence or Asian solidarity on their part. The advance of technology in the 20th century he

maintained actually served to weaken colonial control, not strengthen it. Though he did not explore this point to a huge degree, Keay wrote that the revolution in communications, "impossible to quantify and difficult to incorporate into a historical narrative," had a tremendous impact. Thanks to the advent of the radio, the telegraph, the telephone, and reliable and reasonably fast mail and passenger service (the latter two thanks to the heavily subsidized routes of such companies as Imperial Airways, Air France, and Pan Am) intervention was made much more frequently and on a much wider scale. Ministers in distant imperial capitals - imparted he writes perhaps with "a little dangerous learning" thanks to a whirlwind tour of the colony by airplane - now ordered policies that the colonial officials would never have advocated before. Keay wrote that neither empire nor the liberation of the colonial people from it served to create the much vaunted late 20th century Asian economic miracle; rather empire contributed to an already existing continuum. The "island-girt" Java and South China Seas of the west Pacific rim had always formed an integrated trading basin not unlike the Mediterranean, an area of trade between the Vietnamese, Malay, Chinese, Indians, and Arabs since at least 2000 B.C. European and American colonial realities such as the British East India Company's tolerance of private intra-Asian trade, America's Open Door policy in China, and the inability of the Dutch to withhold free access to the Indies served to strengthen this. Similarly the Chinese commercial networks that dominate the Far East were greatly aided by empire though arguably not created by it. To the extent that imperial power was reasserted in the colonies there were local factors at work. The British for instance were able to achieve the success that they did in Malaya thanks to two things. First, Malaya and Borneo were extremely divided as administratively they were broken up into a four-state Federation, five Unfederated States, and several crown colonies (the Straits Settlements) and racially there was real tension between native Malays and the immigrant Chinese and Indian Malaysians (if populations of the latter were to be considered from Singapore were more numerous than the native Malays). As a consequence there wasn't any true nationwide nationalism in existence to pose the British; indeed, the British helped create a real sense of Malaysian nationalism, in sharp contrast to the French in Indo-China and the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies who sought to pit one group against another in their colonies. Secondly, the colonies after the war thanks to exports primarily of rubber were quite prosperous, removing at least one reason for dissatisfaction with colonial rule. While Keay provided a very useful catalog of the differences in goals and methods of the various colonial powers, contrasting for instance the importance of politics in Paris and ideas of French culture, religion, and prestige in how they ran their colonies with that of the Dutch experience, heavily reliant on business interests and the willing accommodation of its empire by the British, I found his thoughts on commonality very interesting as

well.

John Keay seems to love Asia. In this book he deals with the factors that brought the end of European's empires (and Non-European empires) in Asia. He talks about Nationalism, Communism, the Great Depression and World War Two. Cut into three parts or 'books' each chapter focuses on another empire or region of Asia. The Dutch, the English, the French, the Americans and even touches on the Japanese and their invasions. Background is given and how the different nations dealt with their 'subjects' and their goals. Full of history, a must for anybody interested in Asia's history or on how colonialism seems to work. Some overlap because he has to run up and down time when moving from one part of Asia to another, but comes with a simple map and full of humor.

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