At its peak in the nineteenth century, the British Empire was the largest empire ever known, governing roughly a quarter of the world’s population. In Empire, Niall Ferguson explains how an archipelago of rainy islands... came to rule the world, and examines the costs and consequences, both good and bad, of British imperialism. Though the book’s breadth is impressive, it is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the British Empire; rather, Ferguson seeks to glean lessons from this history for future, or present, empires—namely America. Pointing out that the U.S. is both a product of the British Empire as well as an heir to it, he asks whether America—an empire in denial—should seek to shed or to shoulder the imperial load it has inherited. As he points out in this fascinating book, there is compelling evidence for both. Observing that the difficulty with the achievements of empire is that they are much more likely to be taken for granted than the sins of empire, Ferguson stresses that the British did do much good for humanity in their quest for domination: promotion of the free movement of goods, capital, and labor and a common rule of law and governance chief among them. The question is not whether British imperialism was without blemish. It was not. The question is whether there could have been a less bloody path to modernity, he writes. The challenge for the U.S., he argues, is for it to use its undisputed power as a force for positive change in the world and not to fall into some of the same traps as the British before them. Covering a wide range of topics, including the rise of consumerism (initially fueled by a desire for coffee, tea, tobacco, and sugar), the biggest mass migration in history (20 million emigrants between the early 1600s and the 1950s), the impact of missionaries, the triumph of capitalism, the spread of the English language, and globalization, this is a brilliant synthesis of various topics and an extremely entertaining read. --Shawn Carkonen
I almost didn’t purchase this book, because some professional reviewers denigrated it as an apology for the British Empire. I’m glad I didn’t listen to those reviewers and, after reading the book, I’m puzzled that anyone could come to that conclusion. Professor Ferguson spends a good portion of the book detailing many of the negative aspects of the Empire—the condescending and racist attitudes, frequently, that were displayed by the British towards subject peoples; the excessive use of force (literally, overkill) in places such as Omdurman (where the British, and their Egyptian and Sudanese auxiliaries, used Maxim machine guns to mow down their Islamic fundamentalist opponents, who were generally armed with rifles and swords. The fundamentalist forces had about 35,000 men killed, while the British lost about 400.) and Amritsar, India (where, in 1919, the British forces broke up a peaceful demonstration by firing on unarmed civilians and killing 379 and injuring 1,500 of them). Professor Ferguson also does not sweep British behavior during the Boer War under the historical carpet. He discusses the concentration camps the British set up to detain the wives and children of Boer soldiers. Conditions, especially in the beginning, were horrendous and many of the women and children died from hunger and disease. (When Sir Nevile Henderson complained to Goering about the Nazi concentration camps, Goering leapt at the chance to take out a German encyclopaedia which, under the entry for concentration camp, said this: First used by the British in the South African War). This being said, Professor Ferguson doesn’t fail to point out some of the positive accomplishments of the Empire—the introduction of free trade to areas that otherwise would have engaged in protectionism; improvement in the living standards in many of the colonial areas, due to the above and also due to British investment in underdeveloped areas; the creation of infrastructure and the introduction of democracy and Western legal principles, etc. The thing that disturbs me about some of the professional reviews of this book is the tendency to see things in black and white. Empire is bad, and that’s all there is to say. Well, most things in life are not black and white. Professor Ferguson spends the majority of the book outlining the bad aspects of the Empire, and he uses maybe 25% of the book to discuss the good things. This book is analytical, well-written (Professor Ferguson has an easy, breezy, informal style and, which is always a bonus in a book written by an academic, a refreshing sense of humor), and thought-provoking. There are also many wonderful color and black-and-white photographs which complement the text nicely. The only reason I didn’t give the book 5 stars is that the ending is a bit weak. The book’s subtitle is The Rise And Demise Of The British World Order And The Lessons For Global Power. The conclusion is supposed to provide the lessons, but doesn’t. Professor Ferguson makes the mistake of trying to make the book relevant to today. He should have left well-enough alone and stuck to just talking about the Empire. He makes the obvious point that the United States is the only nation capable today of having a position of global power equivalent to the position Britain used to hold. Fair enough. But what should the U.S. do with this power? Aye, there’s the rub! Professor Ferguson doesn’t really know, so he tosses in some vague generalities. He questions whether ...the dissemination of Western
civilization...can safely be entrusted to Messrs Disney and McDonald. He goes on to say, But it (America) is an empire that lacks the drive to export its capital, its people and its culture to those backward regions which need them most urgently and which, if they are neglected, will breed the greatest threats to its security. Well, maybe we should ask some of the people in those backward places what THEY want. They probably would like the capital...Im not so sure about wanting our people and our culture. This whole subject needs a book of its own (probably many books) for a proper discussion. My key point is that Professor Ferguson does himself a disservice by tossing off comments like this, which come across as afterthoughts...especially after the clockwork, smooth analysis which flows through the rest of the book. Still, overall, this is an excellent book for anyone who wants a well-balanced and comprehensive account of the rise and fall of the British Empire.

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