British Decolonisation: The Record and the Records

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David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 406 pp., $25.95 (hb), ISBN 0393059863.
Christopher Bayly, and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 555 pp., £25.00 (hb), ISBN 0713994630.
Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 475 pp., $27.50 (hb), ISBN 0805076530.
Martin Lynn,, ed., *The British Empire in the 1950s: Retreat or Revival?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 242 pp., £50.00 (hb), ISBN 1403932263.
Spencer Mawby, *British Policy in Aden and the Protectorates 1955–67: Last Outpost of a Middle East Empire* (London: Routledge, 2005), 210 pp., £75.00 (hb), ISBN 0714654590.

When empire ended, successive British governments snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, claiming that its demise marked the fulfilment rather than the renunciation of Britain's imperial mission. As Churchill's government dusted itself down after the fall of Singapore to Japan, Oliver Stanley, the Colonial Secretary, pledged 'to guide colonial peoples along the road to self-government within the framework of the British Empire'. After the loss of India, Arthur Creech Jones (Colonial Secretary in Clement Attlee's cabinet) declared that 'the central purpose of British colonial policy' was 'to guide the colonial territories to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth'. Looking back on 'the wind of change' in Africa, Harold Macmillan's Colonial Secretary, Iain Macleod, averred: 'Of course, we did not "lose" an empire. We followed to its logical conclusion what has always been British colonial policy.' Thus governments of different political persuasions accepted that *Pax Britannica* was a force for good – a view which Niall Ferguson has recently resurrected as he urges the United States to assume an imperial mission in the twenty-first century.[1] If the Conservative and Labour parties of the mid-twentieth

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1 See, for example, Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003) and *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York and London: Penguin Press, 2005).

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century differed over timing and specific issues, they appeared to agree on essential principles. First, good colonial government was the prerequisite for responsible self-government. Second, Britain should avoid precipitate action or rigid timetables but ensure that concessions were granted only when the time was right. Third, a territory's fitness for the ultimate prize of independence should be judged primarily by reference to its stability and solvency. Fourth, Britain should withdraw in a manner which would safeguard its continuing economic and strategic interests. Evolutionary, educative and enlightened, decolonisation would avoid upheaval in Britain and lingering ill-will in former colonies; it would, by extension, enhance the peace and prosperity of the world, and offer a model for the Dutch, French, Belgian and Portuguese overseas empires. Nothing, it seemed, would so become their imperial conduct than the manner of their going.

I

The rhetoric that decorated Britain's retreat from empire did little, however, to hide Britain's weakness in the face of bankruptcy, world war, nationalist resistance and international criticism. For decades governments had struggled to redress the imbalance between dwindling resources and galloping commitments, but the tipping point came in December 1941, when the deceptive calm of Britain's empire was shattered by Japan's onslaught on colonial Asia. On 15 February 1942 General Percival surrendered Singapore to General Yamashita. It was the worst disaster in British military history and the greatest imperial setback since Yorktown. Britain lost 130,000 troops, invaluable war materials, a supposedly invulnerable naval base, prestige and global authority. Japan proceeded to bombard northern Australia and to advance through Burma to the gates of India. When shortly afterwards the raj was rocked by the Quit India movement, fears of a repetition of the 1857 uprising led to desperate measures: 2,500 Indians were shot dead and perhaps as many as 60,000 were detained. A year later a hapless response to the Bengal famine (in which some three million died) further exposed a weak and desperate regime. That India did not fall was because the Japanese advance was distracted by the monsoon, heroic resistance by hill people and the US counter-attack in the Pacific. When the British eventually reconquered Burma, they did so by virtue of Indian resources as much as their own.

Forgotten Armies chronicles the fall of British Asia during the Second World War. Drawing on a rich variety of sources, two distinguished Cambridge historians of modern Asia have written a scholarly and eminently readable work which is deservedly attracting a wide audience. Bayly and Harper survey the conduct and impact of war on each front and at every level, and vividly depict the experiences of the participants. Their principal contribution, however, lies in their portrayal of the lives of Asians caught between two warring empires in 'the great crescent' stretching from Bengal to Singapore. Although the Japanese exposed as worthless Britain's claims to be the protector of subject peoples, their own liberation of Asia – the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere – brought peace and prosperity to very few. Instead, war mobilised forlorn armies of displaced persons – of refugees, comfort women, slave

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labourers, the dispossessed and the malnourished – all of whom have hitherto been without a voice in history. Their plight is known, if at all, from rough-and-ready estimates. For example, it is reckoned that between 50,000 and 100,000 Chinese were massacred in Singapore's *sook ching* (purification). In the labour camps on the Burma railway, perhaps 300,000 Asians died, outnumbering European casualties ten-fold according to one calculation or twenty-fold according to another.

Yet, as Bayly and Harper demonstrate, the communities of the Asian crescent were not entirely the passive victims of alien empires. Some were beneficiaries of the Japanese regime, as was Ba Maw, Burma's former prime minister whom the Japanese appointed as its 'Adipadi' (or Führer) in 1943. More significantly, younger radicals, notably Aung San, pursued a strategy of alternate collaboration and resistance that set in train a popular movement which would make Britain's reoccupation unsustainable. At the same time in Malaya, a youthful communist, Chin Peng, was fashioning a resistance army that would cut short postwar colonialism. Among the Indian diaspora of south-east Asia the charismatic Subhas Chandra Bose transformed the Indian National Army (INA) from an instrument of Japanese imperialism into a militant movement for Indian self-determination. Thus the lawyers who hitherto led political parties were challenged by a new generation of militant patriots. Indeed, Bayly and Harper leave us in no doubt as to where they stand in the debate over the significance of the relatively brief period of Japanese occupation. The Japanese, they say, imposed new uniformities of government and economic management on the previously disparate enclaves of British colonialism. The migration of peoples and transnational political movements of these years reinforced the identities of communities and sharpened differences between them. Dramatic, moving and profoundly disturbing, *Forgotten Armies* is a masterly re-examination of the upheavals in British Asia during the Second World War. The book ends with the Japanese surrender but, notwithstanding British victories in Burma and their euphoric return to Singapore, Bayly and Harper conclude that the colonial regimes of the postwar period (which is to be covered in a sequel) were doomed by the damage inflicted on the British empire in Asia in 1941–5.

II

Notwithstanding the collapse of British power in Asia during the Second World War, a new imperialism arose after 1945. Many in war-torn Britain were convinced that the constructive development of 'colonial estates' would revive the home economy, block the expansion of world communism and enable Britain to continue its historic global role. They valued south-east Asia more than ever before; by the late 1940s British Malaya was the principal dollar earner in the sterling area and European colonies were front-line territories in Asia's cold war. Moreover, although India might have become a liability by 1947, its loss encouraged a 'second colonial occupation of Africa', intended to develop the resources of that continent as a surrogate for south Asia. Likewise, Britain's shabby withdrawal from Palestine in 1948 by no means marked the end of its Middle Eastern empire; on the contrary, Britain maintained

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its presence there, occasionally by military intervention, on account of the region's oil and strategic importance. Furthermore, armed resistance to the British, together with bitter contests between leaders of colonial nationalist movements, strengthened Britain's reluctance to abandon territories. In short, if British governments were under pressure to retreat from empire, they were also under pressure to remain. Consequently, they adapted to new circumstances and devised policies appropriate for each territory. Taken together, these policies amounted to an over-arching strategy whose principal objectives were to shed millstones (notably India, Burma and Palestine), exploit assets (such as Africa's resources), share costs (as in defence pacts with the rest of the Commonwealth and the United States), and, in time, transfer the burdens of colonial government to co-operative successor states. As the structures of formal rule were replaced by webs of political influence, military treaties and business networks, British decolonisation appeared to be the pursuit of imperialism by other means. All this suggests that the empire was not lost in a surfeit of sentimentalism or sheer funk, or even in a fit of absence of mind, but that a mind – an 'official mind' – was at work, appraising the national interest and applying the art of the possible.[2]

The phrenology of the official mind of British decolonisation has been investigated by a major collaborative endeavour, the British Documents on End of Empire Project (BDEEP). The purpose of BDEEP, in which I should immediately declare an interest as a member of the project committee and editor of two of its volumes, has been to publish documents from British official archives on the end of colonial and associated rule in Africa, the Mediterranean, the Pacific, south-east Asia and the West Indies. Since 1992, thirty-two books of documents have been published. The 'general' volumes cover the metropolitan context of decision making; 'country' volumes focus on specific territories.[3] BDEEP followed the documentary collections on the *Transfer of Power to India* (edited by Nicholas Mansergh) and the *Struggle for Independence in Burma* (edited by Hugh Tinker),[4] though it differs from them in significant respects:

2 In *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), an important corrective to post-colonial theory, Bernard Porter does nor deny that empire materially affected nearly everyone in Britain or that governments attempted to manage it rationally, but does argue that for the most part people neither cared about nor were conscious of the connections between empire and daily life.

3 General volumes: S. R. Ashton and S. E. Stockwell, eds., *Imperial Policy and Colonial Practice 1925–1945*, 2 parts (1996); R. Hyam, ed., *The Labour Government and the End of Empire 1945–1951*, 4 parts (1992); D. Goldsworthy, ed., *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire 1951–1957*, 3 parts (1994); Ronald Hyam and Wm. R. Louis, eds., *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire 1957–1964*, 2 parts (2000); S. R. Ashton and Wm. R. Louis, eds., *East of Suez and the Commonwealth*, 3 parts (2004). Country volumes: K. M. de Silva, ed., *Sri Lanka*, 2 parts (1998); R. Rathbone, ed., *Ghana*, 2 parts (1992); A. J. Stockwell, ed., *Malaya*, 3 parts (1995); J. Kent, ed., *Egypt and the Defence of the Middle East*, 3 parts (1998); D.H. Johnson, ed., *Sudan*, 2 parts (1998); S. R. Ashton and D. Killingray, eds., *The West Indies* (1999); M. Lynn., ed., *Nigeria*, 2 parts (2001); A. J. Stockwell, ed., *Malaysia* (2004); P. Murphy, ed., *Central Africa*, 2 parts (2005). Volumes on Fiji (ed. B. Lal) and Malta (ed. S. C. Smith) are forthcoming. Also in the same series are two volumes of *Sources for Colonial Studies in the Colonial Office* compiled by A. Thurston (vol. 1 1995, vol. 2 1998).

4 Nicholas Mansergh et al., eds., *Constitutional Relations between Britain and India: the Transfer of Power 1942–7*, 12 vols. (London, 1970–83); Hugh Tinker, ed., *Constitutional Relations between Britain and Burma: the Struggle for Independence, 1944–1948*, 2 vols. (London, 1983–4).

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BDEEP is not an official (i.e. government-sponsored) venture; its chronological scope is longer and its geographical compass is broader. Moreover, since BDEEP draws on the records of a greater range of government departments, the series traces a far more complex process of policy making. When the project was launched in the mid-1980s, the approach to the subject was already moving beyond the simplistic assumptions regarding conflict between imperialism and nationalism on which much of the earlier literature rested, and as the BDEEP spotlight has swung across the levels of decision-making – Westminster, Whitehall, government house, colonial secretariat, legislative council, district office – so it has shed light on the many minds of decolonisation.[5]

III

Whether a fundamental consensus underpinned the management of empire in the postwar period, and, if so, whether it amounted to the management of British decline or the management of imperial revival are questions addressed in *The British Empire in the 1950s: Retreat or Revival?* This is a coherent collection of essays which, although not comprehensive in its coverage, penetrates the fog that frequently obscures understanding of imperial developments between transfer of power in India and 'wind of change' in Africa. Originating in the Wiles Colloquium at Queen's University, Belfast, in September 2004, it was edited by Martin Lynn who tragically died at the height of his powers shortly before the book went to press. Most of the ten contributors draw expertly on The National Archives, Kew, and write comfortably in the milieu of high politics; indeed, six of them are editors of BDEEP volumes. In a thoughtful introduction Martin Lynn sets out the themes that span the period. This is followed by the first of three overviews, a *tour d'horizon* in which John Darwin examines Britain's post-war strategy against a backdrop of sixty years of overseas policy. Darwin argues that imperial renovation under Attlee was a short-lived attempt to insure Britain against the uncertainties of the postwar world. Whereas Darwin examines Britain's global position, Stephen Howe discusses its 'internal decolonisation'. Surveying British culture in the 1950s, alongside recent post-colonial polemic, he asks: 'When (if ever) did Empire end?' His answer is: not in the 1950s. It is, indeed, difficult to establish connections between the storm and stress of colonial emergencies or the ebb and flow of imperial fortunes in the 1950s, on the one hand, and, on the other, developments in literature, drama, art, music and popular culture. Howe's view is that, while 'Britain in the 1950s was "post-" many things', notably postwar and post-austerity, 'it was certainly very far still from being post-imperial' (p. 234). The third overview is an essay by Stephen Ashton (the general editor of BDEEP) which discusses Whitehall policy making and provides context for case studies by other contributors. Ashton shows that differences between territories and between government departments encumbered policy making. Since it was

5 In his forthcoming *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Ronald Hyam encapsulates this approach in a major reassessment of British policy making and the end of empire.

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generally held, however, that the good behaviour of territories after they achieved independence would be more important to Britain than their costs and benefits as colonies, the overarching objective of the Colonial Office was to revitalise the empire in order to liquidate it in an orderly manner. But lack of time and funds impeded such preparations, with the result that by the end of the 1950s, as Ashton argues, ministers and officials reconciled themselves to the acceleration of decolonisation on the ground that going too fast was less risky than going too slow.

In the first of three African case studies, Philip Murphy reconsiders the origins of the Central African Federation, the principal and most problematic of the decade's constitutional constructions. Addressing Ronald Hyam's thesis that the Federation was a rare example of imperial revival and was designed to contain South African expansion, Murphy contends that the story of Central Africa conforms closely to other imperial endgames, being shaped by British anxiety about settlers' resistance and marked by the government's willingness to yield to their demands. Martin Lynn's chapter on Nigeria in the 1950s discusses British attempts to manage both nationalism and regionalism in a country which, after the transfer of power to India, was the largest and most populous dependency in the empire. Determined to prevent the fragmentation of Nigeria, the British leaned over backwards to meet the northern fear of southern rule and allowed the north to dominate the federation. In this way they engineered a retreat from colonial rule that safeguarded Britain's interests. In 'Things fall apart', Richard Rathbone departs from the sphere of high politics, which he occupied as editor of BDEEP's Ghana volume, to account for the collapse of local government in pre-independent Gold Coast. Following the Accra riots (February 1948), British priorities switched from local government and rural administration to nationalist politics and state building. Rathbone reveals the underside of successful decolonisation for, while the British emerged 'with some credit' from the struggle for independence, they allowed local government to fall into disarray with disastrous results for the rights, governance and wellbeing of 85 per cent of the population.

A pair of essays by Sarah Stockwell and Nicholas White investigate the extent to which British business embraced the official rhetoric of imperial revival. White argues that, notwithstanding the value placed on empire by Conservative administrations, 'the British business version of the end of empire in the 1950s was a story of retreat and not revival' (p. 113). As anxieties over political change mounted, firms engaged in wide-scale geographical diversification. Even so, as experience in Singapore proved, the competitive edge of international capitalism proved to be a greater threat to British business in colonies and former colonies than did political subversion or international communism. In 'African prospects: mining the empire for Britain in the 1950s', Sarah Stockwell contrasts the decline of colonial agriculture with a rush for minerals. She shows how the British government prized the mineral potential of Africa, not least to secure strategic reserves for defence purposes, while British business was generally reluctant to take part in such ventures. Consequently, in order to exploit these resources, government was forced into an ambivalent partnership with the United States.

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Britain's ambivalent relationship with the United States is the theme of Nigel Ashton's chapter, one of a pair dealing with the international dimension of British imperialism in the 1950s and 1960s. Ashton argues that a 'crisis of interdependence' occurred in Anglo-American relations following the Suez crisis and erupted in differences over the Middle East, the Congo and British Guiana. Whereas Macmillan worked on the assumption that there was a new special relationship with the United States in which Britain would play a significant, albeit junior, role, US administrations worked to integrate Western defence as a whole and centre it on Washington. For Macmillan, the 'experiment in interdependence was an unhappy one' (p. 181) and, Ashton maintains, it was this unease, rather than any desire to appease the United States, that drove him to apply for membership of the European Economic Community (EEC). The Suez crisis also stands as the pivotal moment in Wm. Roger Louis's essay on UN reactions to British colonialism. Until 1956 the British had generally succeeded (with a few notorious exceptions such as Palestine) in keeping the United Nations off their colonial turf. After the Suez crisis, he points out, Britain became Public Enemy Number One. General Assembly Resolution 1514 of 1960 (which called for the immediate liberation of all colonies), together with the scrutiny of colonialism conducted by the UN's Committee of 24, compounded the difficulties of decolonisers. Louis pursues the story to 1971, when the British government felt it could at last withdraw from the Committee of 24 without risking international protest. By then, he writes, anti-colonialism was running out of steam at the UN as the tally of colonies (apart from the Rhodesian incubus) was reduced to 'outposts without an empire'.

IV

Aden was an imperial outpost which proved a heavy colonial cross to bear in the 1960s. Surprisingly, in view of its centrality to Britain's postwar defence strategy, Aden has hitherto received relatively little scholarly attention. Spencer Mawby's *British Policy in Aden and the Protectorate 1955–67* draws on primary material held in British and US archives, as well as a wide range of secondary sources, to go a very long way in filling this gap. It does so, moreover, in an arresting fashion. First of all, Mawby shows that, in contrast with other postwar imperial retreats, Britain displayed no loss of will in South Arabia but pursued a forward policy associated with the earlier period of 'high imperialism'. The 1956 Suez crisis merely confirmed the British in their determination to stay in southern Arabia. He demonstrates, second, that there was a large measure of consensus in the views of Labour and Conservative governments. They shared a common imperial heritage; both were committed to retaining influence in the Middle East and both were hostile to the regional ambitions of the Egyptian leader, Colonel Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Third, he reinstates the importance of nationalism – a factor which in recent years has often been downplayed in studies of British decolonisation. In so doing, he reveals the misconceptions and false hopes which policy makers entertained about Britain's ability, first of all, to remain in South Arabia, then to control the process of withdrawal and, finally, to exert influence after its departure.

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The Aden debacle highlights the mindlessness of ending empire, or at least the folly of good intentions and the lack of scope for reflection. Although they generally hoped, as a cabinet committee of officials put it in 1954, to 'secure acceptance of a reasonable and beneficial delay in order to ensure a more orderly transition', in one territory after another the British were overtaken by events and were forced to quit in a hurry, dumping friends and breaking promises as they went. Singling out strong men with whom they might do business, proconsuls gilded the nationalist credentials of potential despots and, as Sam Falle (the Foreign Office's adviser on Aden) lamented, lauded as statesmen those whom they had once condemned as murderers. In their scramble to unscramble the empire, the British failed to prepare colonies adequately for the future and, when independence came, ministers and officials were uneasily aware that they were gambling on the future of successor states and on British interests in them. Coming out of retirement in May 1967 to be the last high commissioner of South Arabia, Sir Humphrey Trevelyan was determined not to preside over 'a scuttle on Palestine lines', but the military soon lost control of Aden's Crater district and the federal government ceased to function. Like Mountbatten during the last months of the British raj twenty years previously, Trevelyan pressed for an earlier date for British withdrawal in order to avoid chaos. In this he succeeded, but, as far as the British were concerned, the independence celebrations at the end of November 1967 were muted. No member of the British royal family attended and, as Trevelyan departed, the military band struck up 'Fings ain't wot they used to be'.

V

Things were certainly not what they should have been in Kenya. As it happens Kenya is conspicuously absent from *The British Empire in the 1950s* and remains a gap in the BDEEP series, which, it is to be hoped, will be filled in due course by a volume edited by John Lonsdale and David Throup. Perhaps Kenya's omission is because it does not fit the pattern of British decolonisation. Indeed, in the prologue to *Histories of the Hanged*, David Anderson suggests that Kenya's experience was atypical:

> The British have liked to imagine that their retreat from imperial grandeur was dignified and orderly. Above all in Africa, the British tend to think they made a better job of it than anyone else . . . Talks at Lancaster House, constitution-mongering, and deals struck in smoke-filled rooms were the stuff of British decolonization. This, at least, is the received wisdom. While this was surely true for some parts of Africa, it was not true for Kenya. (p. 5)

Although there were parallels between the Kenyan emergency and those in Palestine, Malaya, Cyprus and Aden, and while the British adapted to Kenyan circumstances Malayan counterinsurgency techniques (such as 'villagisation'), Anderson argues that the corruption, detentions, violence and executions in Kenya were exceptional.

During Kenya's Emergency (1952–9) the gruesome rituals, horrific murders and savage mutilations perpetrated by Mau Mau rebels received immense publicity in Britain. The impression was given that Europeans were the prime target of violence, although in reality the struggle was largely between Africans and most of Mau Mau's victims were Kikuyu. Whereas 32 white settlers were killed, 1,800 African civilians

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are known to have been murdered by Mau Mau. The bodies of many hundreds more Kikuyu who disappeared in the upheaval were never found. Among combatants, the British military and police suffered fewer than 200 casualties during the seven-year campaign; the official estimate of deaths among Mau Mau, by contrast, was 12,000, although the figure is likely to have been as high as 20,000. Even more disturbing was the plight of African non-combatants who were victims of the appalling neglect and systematic terror of what had become a police state. The British rounded up thousands of Kikuyu and held them in camps for 're-education'. By December 1954 the number of detainees had risen to over 71,000. Their property was confiscated and most were held without trial. Bit by bit stories of the terror leaked out, but it was not until July 1959, after eleven detainees had been murdered by prison warders at Hola, that the infamy of the camps rocked the political establishment, as had Governor Eyre's suppression of Jamaica's Morant Bay rebellion in 1865 and General Dyer's conduct at Amritsar in 1919. In a furious debate at Westminster not only Labour MPs but also Enoch Powell excoriated the Conservative front bench. Alan Lennox-Boyd was on the point of resigning as Secretary of State for the Colonies and Macmillan feared that colonial scandals in Africa might bring down his government. But no minister resigned and no British official, soldier or policeman was prosecuted for misconduct. Nor was there a comprehensive examination of the allegations of widespread torture and abuse. Instead, a line was drawn and Macmillan went on to win a landslide victory in the general election a few months later, while Kenyan independence (1963) turned out to be a victory for loyalists and a defeat for rebels. Indeed, under Kenyatta there was 'a deafening silence about Mau Mau' and, as Anderson and Elkins conclude, instead of the end of empire ushering in a period of peace and reconciliation, the struggle has continued to divide Kikuyu people to this day (Anderson, pp. 336–7). The British legacy is a far cry from Niall Ferguson's guilt-free memories of his early childhood in the Kenya of the 1960s.

While it has long been known that the British prosecuted a dirty war in Kenya and performed dirty tricks in the courts – for example they fixed the trial of Jomo Kenyatta to ensure that he was detained for years – the sheer enormity of their methods has not been logged until now. David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged* and Caroline Elkins's *Imperial Reckoning* reveal the appalling shame and brutality of Britain's counter-terror. The simultaneous publication of these books has led to their being considered as a pair, in much the same way as J. A. Hobson and V. I. Lenin are sometimes bracketed as critics of imperialism. In fact, however, Anderson (of St Antony's College, Oxford) and Elkins (of Harvard) do differ in their sources, perspectives and assessments. Anderson sets out to explain, not rehabilitate Mau Mau, and tells 'a story of atrocity and excess on both sides' (p. 2). He examines the origins and the course of violence over land, in Nairobi and in the forests. His investigation into the settlers' 'lust for retribution' (p. 157) has unearthed wholesale perversion of judicial procedures, involving torture during police interrogation of suspects, rigged trials and state executions. Central to his research are the trial documents held at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi, which show that 3,000 Africans were examined in special courts, 1,574 were convicted and 1,090 were hanged. This was an unprecedented use of state

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execution in the history of British imperialism and double the rate in French Algeria. Many more suspects passed through the 'pipeline' of rehabilitation to be crammed into the 're-education' camps, where punishment, starvation and disease killed thousands.

Caroline Elkins focuses on the camps. The number of victims is unknown, not least because there is little accurate information on the camps and prisons. Left to extrapolate from census figures and the testimonies of her numerous witnesses, she varies in her estimates from 30,000 Kikuyu sentenced to prison (many for life, p. 88), to between 160,000 and 320,000 detainees (p. xiii), to the relocation of over one million Kikuyu to 804 villages that were 'detention camps in all but name' (pp. 235–7); to the detention of 'some 1.5 million people, or nearly the entire Kikuyu population' (p. xiv); to between 100,000 and 300,000 deaths during screening (p. 89); to between 130,000 and 300,000 Kikuyu who 'are unaccounted for' (p. 366). Having conducted hundreds of interviews with survivors of the camps, relatives of the victims, British settlers and former colonial officials, she concludes that there was 'a murderous campaign to eliminate Kikuyu people' (p. xvi). Those who protested in public likened the camps to Auschwitz, Belsen and Russian Gulags, and Elkins, more frequently and erratically than Anderson, makes similar comparisons. While she dismisses the suggestion that ministers and officials 'set out to annihilate the Kikuyu population' (pp. 60–1, 90), at other points in her book she attributes to them methods of the Third Reich (p. 88 ff., 117, 147, 153, 189), maintains that they acted in support of settlers whose racist views were 'overtly eliminationist' (p. 48), or leaves open the question of whether 'targeted eliminations were part of the colonial government's policy' (p. 193). Indeed, whereas her account of the camps is both chilling and compelling, her assessment of British policy is less convincing. She peddles the notion of British aristocrats running the colonial empire, misrepresents Enoch Powell at the time of the Hola debate as a 'onetime Tory MP' (pp. 350–1) and maintains that Lennox-Boyd 'had no intention of facilitating self-government in any of Britain's colonial territories' (p. 139). Fundamentally misleading is her contention that government, with very few exceptions from the secretary of state to the district officer, worked systematically and in concert with settlers to maintain British colonial rule in Kenya. Anderson, by contrast, dwells on British sins of omission in addition to those of commission, and indicates crimes that occurred by default as well as by design. By describing differences between government and settlers, he explains the persistent failures and frustrations experienced by the former in trying to control the latter.

In Kenya, more than in other colonies, high-mindedness and tough-mindedness were needed in equal measure. Instead, brains succumbed to brawn with dreadful results. For too long the official mind quailed before settler muscle. Ultimately the damning record of state terrorism was erased from the official memory, as both Anderson and Elkins discovered when they trawled The National Archives at Kew. Government papers told them little about the camps and the trials; many files are still retained and even more are missing. Yet the Kenyan files are not alone in having been plundered. When a notorious incident from the Malayan Emergency resurfaced in 1970 and the Secretary of State for Defence called for an enquiry into allegations that

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in December 1948 Scots Guardsmen had shot dead 24 unarmed Chinese villagers in Batang Kali, an official in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office reported that Colonial Office papers on the incident had been destroyed, which, he wrote, was 'of course the fate suffered by most of the C.O. files on law & order in Malaya during the Emergency'. Perhaps searches under the Freedom of Information Act will produce suppressed evidence on forgotten incidents in Britain's wars of decolonisation, but they cannot restore what has been destroyed.

Where does this leave 'colonial records history'? Have gaps in the records falsified the record? The archives of modern government are immense and complex, but, even so, their coverage of decolonisation is neither complete nor always transparent. They may conceal almost as much as they reveal. Some decisions may not have been committed to paper; accounts of others may now be lost. Of the files that survive, many may obfuscate the aims and motives of decision-makers or acquire in retrospect a significance which they did not enjoy at the time of writing. Yet none of this nullifies their value provided they are interrogated, like any other source, with scepticism and imagination as well as with knowledge and understanding of their historical context.

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