

REPORT ON TEN CITIES THAT MADE AN EMPIRE – Tristram HUNT  
October 2019, Ronnie Glavin

Tristram Hunt was the MP (Labour) for Stoke until 2017 when he gave up politics to take up the post of Director of the V&A Museum. He graduated with a 'first' in History from Trinity College Cambridge and as a historian his field of expertise is the Victorian City.

In this book Hunt looks at Ten Cities that map out the chronological course of the British Empire, beginning with the Puritan settlement of Boston in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and ending with Liverpool in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century. His journey progresses from Boston to Bridgetown, Dublin, Cape Town, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Bombay, Melbourne and New Delhi. Hunt makes the point that although the British Empire covered much land the forces that facilitated its expansion were trade and so although many of the Empire's subjects lived on the land in villages it was the need for good ports, access to raw materials and the ability to turn some of these into goods via factories that meant that cities played a key role in the growth of the Empire.

Hunt acknowledges that the Empire had some positive and some negative qualities and he is not afraid to explore the negatives. Chapter 2 (Bridgetown) begins with the gruesome description of a dead slave and he makes no attempt to hide the brutality exercised on the sugar plantations on top of physically demanding and unpleasant labour. His account of how the British forced opium grown in Bengal and transported from Calcutta to Hong Kong onto the Chinese population covers one of the British Empire's less celebrated periods. Indeed, one of the recurring themes is the difference in housing and sanitary arrangements between European 'masters' and local workers.

The journey also looks at how the Empire grew and changed. The loss of the American Colonies encouraged Britain to look at the Caribbean and then via the rapacious free trade buccaneering spirit of the East India Company to India and then China, via Hong Kong. The Victorian Era ushered in a spirit of benevolence for the subjugated peoples whereby in exchange for their wealth Britain brought in religion, law, sanitation and a civil service.

The chapter on Melbourne raises further the question of British views on the natives. Whereas, it is one of superiority and disregard for the fate of many of the subjugated Indians and Chinese workers, there is admiration for the development of the white colonists in Australia. The influence of eugenics suggested to some British writers that the white Australian worker was superior to his malnourished, overworked British counterpart.

Hunt concentrates on the cities' development in the context of Empire but does raise a few interesting points about those cities after they left the Empire. He describes how some of the Georgian buildings underwent a programme of destruction as Dublin was to rise again as a peasant Gaelic capital shorn of the neo-classical detritus of the humiliating 18<sup>th</sup> Century and so provides comment on how some of the post Imperial leaders viewed their time as part of Empire.

The final two chapters are poignant. The creation of New Delhi as a rival to Rome as the centre of a 1000-year empire in the run up to Indian independence says a lot about British views of Empire and the inability at the time to acknowledge the direction in which the world was moving. The description of the rise and fall of Liverpool as a metaphor for the Empire itself concludes with the turn of the circle as Hunt describes how Indian and Chinese investment is now transforming derelict parts of that city.

Hunt writes well and makes good use of his sources to give an impression of life in those cities during the different phases of Empire.