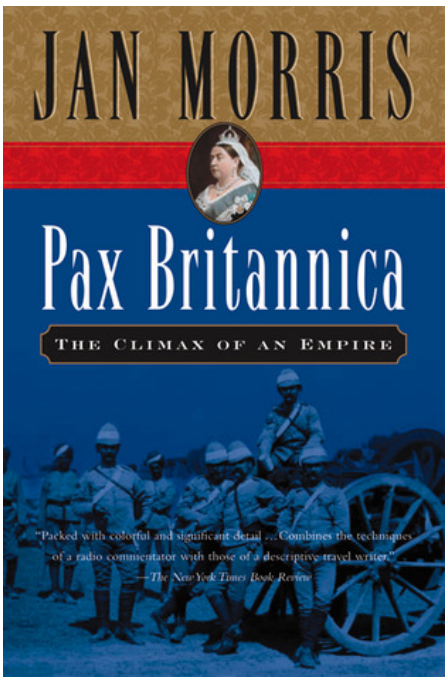

Pax Britannica: Climax of an Empire

Jan Morris

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Pax Britannica: Climax of an Empire Jan Morris
This centerpiece of the trilogy captures the British at the height of their vigor and self-satisfaction, imposing their traditions and tastes, their idealists and rascals, on diverse peoples of the world. Index. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

Pax Britannica: Climax of an Empire Details

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From Reader Review Pax Britannica: Climax of an Empire for online ebook

Craig Russell says

Very readable. Well researched. Morris both captures the big picture and intrigues with the details. I'll be looking for his other books.

Tony says

James (before he became Jan) observes the British Empire stylishly in his trilogy which includes Farewell The Trumpets and Heaven's Command.

Love says

A beautifully written tour of the British empire around the turn of the century, arguably the very climax of that complex and fascinating institution. The author takes the approach of writing only about what she personally finds interesting and can spend a few dozen pages on some small near forgotten Caribbean port she finds intriguing.

Lisa says

I didn't find this exceedingly interesting but it was ok. It focused a lot on India. As a Canadian I didn't get much out of it and the story of the founding of Ottawa as the capital total fallacy which makes me wonder what else was false in this.

Gerald Sinstadt says

The year 1897 is the peg upon which Jan Morris hangs her overview of the British Empire in the hour of its greatest glory. 1897 because it was the year of Victoria's golden jubilee, Queen for sixty years. As we approach a similar milestone in the reign of Elizabeth II the book acquires added piquancy.

All over the map of the world in 1897 red marked the extent of British influence: "a begrudging kind of paradise," Morris calls it. A paradoxical paradise, too, for there was little uniformity to bind the various patches of land - from tiny atolls to semi-continents - which variably ruled themselves while always being subject to Victoria's government. "Legally," the author writes, "there was no such thing as a British Empire. It had no constitutional meaning. Physically, too, it was a kind of fiction, or bluff, in that it implied a far stronger power at the centre than really existed."

But it worked. Strengths and weaknesses everywhere, but still it worked. There can be no greater praise for

this book than to say that it encompasses the whole, black, white and grey, while constantly illuminating it with the detail. I quickly abandoned making notes; they were already too numerous to marshall sensibly. Page after page offers a telling vignette, a memorable phrase. At random, then, this miniature of life in the Raj: "The soldiers flirted in the public gardens. The officers played polo, sailed their yachts in the harbour, and sometimes went to cockfights, abetted by local Irishmen with fingers along the sides of their noses." In a few dozen words, the reader is taken there, seeing it as it was.

This is serious history, seriously told, always enlivened, never cheapened, by Morris's love of a quirky anecdote. There are many but one, concerning William Packenham from a passage on memorable Royal Navy commanders, must suffice: "... when an elderly lady at a civic luncheon asked him if he was married, he replied courteously, 'No, madam, no. I keep a loose woman in Edinburgh.'"

Pax Britannica is a worthy successor to the first in Jan Morris's brilliant trilogy, and an irresistible appetiser for the third.

Robert Davidson says

Superb. The second book of the trilogy which i regard as the best History written so far on the British Empire. The Author, with a laconic wit takes the reader on a tour of the many Imperial possessions interweaving the human stories in their time and place. So many people came from those small Islands and settled in so many diverse locations, provides us with an amazing array of lives led. Despite the flaws of the British Empire which the Author describes in detail one is left with the impression it did more good than harm. The reminders are still with us today to view such as, visiting an old Church in Ballycastle N.I. where the wall plaques list the Soldiers who fought in the Indian Mutiny, or the former Hill Station built by the Royal Engineers at Zomba in Malawi and here in Canada walking through the incomparable Stanley Park in Vancouver. jan morris is a very good Writer.

Mk100 says

Volume two of the trilogy. The apex of empire. The writing shines as bright as any gold the British ever brought home. Whatever one thinks of British colonial behavior - the good, the bad and the ugly - this book is just good.

Mark says

brilliant

Lyn Elliott says

Jan Morris wrote this in the 1960s, well before post-colonial theory was properly formulated or the fall out from the dismantling of colonial empires was as evident as it is today.
But I would recommend this wholeheartedly to anyone even remotely interested in the politics, culture and

societies of the lands that fell within the scope of British rule, or in the phenomenon of an empire that reached to most continents yet was based in a small island off the coast of Europe.

In 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, the British Empire appeared to be at its peak. Its glories were celebrated in all colonies (less enthusiastically in some than others). It was held together, she remarks near the end of the book, by a combination of force (in occupied lands) and sentiment. The New Imperialism was in full swing in England itself, and the millions of Britons who had emigrated and settled in the colonies identified very strongly with England as the mother country. And although the feelings of native inhabitants of the countries occupied and settled by the British varied, the glories of the Empire and its sovereign were celebrated around the globe.

Morris writes that she set out to try 'to evoke the feeling of Britishness in 1897 as it was manifested throughout the globe' (p.11). She has organised the book primarily in themes, ranging from migrations, glory, caste (which she uses often where I would use class, but nevertheless the fine gradings of status, inclusion and exclusion are dealt with0, the armies and navies that maintained British power, pioneers and settlers. architecture, dying young and the British empire as a development agency. More time is given to India than any other colony, appropriate to its central importance to British trade, wealth and sense of importance in the world.
She makes broad general statements that allow you to pout together things you haven't put together before, and to see familiar things in a new light. the broad weep is backed up with a glorious mass of anecdote. Sometimes the facts get lost in the sweep of a fine phrase or clever thought, but overall I found I enjoyed the broad sweep and general sparkling tone that didn't mind even the inaccuracies I picked up about my own part of the world, Adelaide inSouth Australia, where she has surveyor Light select the site of the future capital of South Australia by climbing a bluff near Holdfast Bay. There is not a hill, cliff or bluff for miles. There would have been a sand dune he could have climbed but that's it.

This broad survey, remarkable in its scope and depth, is a marvellous read, coloured throughout with Morris's sometimes sardonic view of the English and an eye for comedy and farce as well as pomp and circumstance.

On every page is an idea, a sentence that cries out to be noted - but I haven't done it because my notes would be far too long and I would rather re-read the lively prose of the original.

Now to gear myself for the wars and unravelling of the twentieth century.

Patrick says

This is essential history.

Amazon review:
I'm in the midst of reading the trilogy, and I must say that, as a history major and history buff, I've never come across a history so well-told and of such consistent quality. And by "quality" I mean not only the quality of the prose itself but the editing. Those of us who read for pleasure and edification are aware of the sorry state of today's editing, or shall I say absence of editing. We've grown so accustomed to typos and repetition and horrible grammar, so tired of shouting to ourselves, "Where the hell is the editing?" that we find the meticulously edited Pax Britannica like a drink of cool, clear water in the desert.

The above comment can be applied to all volumes of the trilogy. Climax of an Empire may give one the impression that Morris is an Imperialist himself. And why not? At its height the British Empire was indeed a splendid edifice which, on balance, was a noble cause.

Yet, reading the final volume of the trilogy, Farewell The Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat, one can see that Morris has no illusions. Being a Welsh nationalist himself (now, herself), author James (now Jan) Morris certainly can't be accused of being a tory historian. Even in Climax of Empire, describing Pax Britannica at its most exhuberant, Morris is able to step back:

"In Africa they would try...to weld the ancient orders into the structure of Empire, exactly fitting each measure of responsibility into an imperial pattern, so that the pettiest pagan wizard could play his part in the grand design. But by these visionary means nobody was satisfied. The Empire lost part of its point, and the Africans found themselves stuck in a bog of tradition, from which before long all the more intelligent ones did their best to escape."

So, those of us with today's politically correct scorn of the benighted past need not censure ourselves for the irresistible delight we get from reading passages like:

"Throughout the length and breadth of the Empire a well-spoken, reasonably well-connected young man, with a few introductions in the right places, and a sufficiently entertaining line in small talk, could travel by himself without feeling the need for a hotel."

Or here, where he likens Queen Victoria to the Empire itself:

"...proud and often overbearing, but with an unexpected sweetness at the heart; suburban and sometimes vulgar, sentimental, in old age less beautiful than imposing; girlishly beguiled by the mysteries of the Orient, maternally considerate towards the Natives, stubbornly determined to hang on to her possessions...."

The entire trilogy reads this way. And the footnotes are just as delightful, often gossipy, often trenchant:

"When there were no positive or acceptable rules to follow, they were told, they must consult two simple principles: 'Equity or Good Conscience'.

[Footnote] "'Whichever,' cynics used to add, 'is the less.'"

The fact is, that despite the real depredations by the Portuguese and Belgian imperialists, which gave imperialism a bad name, British imperialism, in and of itself, was benign, establishing peace, justice, integrity and stability, where before had reigned unbridled murder, tyranny, corruption and chaos. That this was only a veneer which would crumble as soon as the British left, says more about the resilience of barbarism than the merits of Pax Britannica. To be sure, only one "gift" of modernity seems to have been a welcomed and permanent addition to local cultures: guns and machetes. Here were far more efficient means for settling scores than spears and stones. And as we see today, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, and excepting India, the Anglo-Saxon dominions and a few others, civilization -- call it imperialism or colonialism -- seems to have made no impression at all.

After the fall of the Roman Empire it took Europe centuries before Rome's former colonies rose on their own to the level of civilization imposed by Pax Romana. So it's no coincidence that the title of this grand trilogy, this masterpiece of historical narrative, is Pax Britannica.

Pamela says

In this second book of the Pax Britannica, we have all of the Empire from Newfoundland in 1583 to Bermuda in 1607 when 150 Englishmen shipwrecked on the reef during a hurricane and consequently, inspired William Shakespeare to write *The Tempest*. The European possessions are here, too. Gibralter, the Channel Islands, Malta, and Ireland, always Ireland. British Guiana and the Falklands, the Cape Colonies, as well. All of these and more join the big ones from the first part of this immense trilogy. Morris discusses the status of the British Empire as it existed on the day of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. This represents the height of empire and focuses on the self-satisfied pride of the populace in their position in the world of nations. Morris describes all aspects of empire and the style of government, architecture, technology, economics, and religion in each colony or possession. He also foreshadows the troubles to come by showcasing some of the discontent. Many of the colonies were, by this time, showing tiny gleamings of a sense of nationalism and, even in England, disenchantment with the idea of colonialism was seeing a faint start.

Robert Clear says

In this excellent book Jan Morris paints a fascinating portrait of the British Empire at its zenith, combining a deep appreciation for the subject with a light touch and a flair for evocative detail.

Peter Ellwood says

Outstanding piece of work. It is worth reading for the quality of the prose alone. But, together with its two companion volumes, it also gives an authoritative account of a period of history that is all too often treated with pinko bias by writers these days. Read all three, end to end. Absolutely recommended.

Timothy Auger says

Whereas the first volume of the trilogy tells the story of the build-up of the British Empire during Victoria's reign, this (second) volume is an extended portrait of the empire as it was in 1897, the year of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. Whereas the first volume is essentially a chronological narrative told through a series of well-chosen and colourful vignettes, this second volume is more thematic, and more analytical. Consequently it digs deeper, fairly exposing both the virtues and the vices of Imperialism at its height - hinting also at the omens of its decline in the first half of the 20th century. It's a less rollicking narrative than the first volume, perhaps even ten per cent longer than it need have been, but a terrific, readable introduction to a period that now seems so distant. Lots of colourful detail, some comic, some depressing. I strongly recommend that you read the trilogy in the right order - much more rewarding. I would recommend these books to anyone with an interest in contemporary politics - it's surprising how many threads run through the centuries.

As I think of it now, it seems amazing to me that I was born only 50 years after Victoria's jubilee. Imperial illusions still persisted when I was at school in the 1950s. (And you can still detect faint traces in some of the arguments of those arguing for Brexit in 2016.) Yet really the age of empire was another world altogether, and Jan Morris is good at exposing, in the kindest possible way, the cracks in the edifice that were starting to

spread even in 1897.

I'm glad guerrilla is correctly spelt in this volume - guerilla in the one before. Gorillas are different.

One notable absence: really nothing on Malaya and Singapore, known then as the Straits Settlements, regarded then and later as strategically vital. This lack is apparent also in the first volume. That's a bit odd, considering how colourful and well documented the history of Singapore is. Perhaps there's more in Volume 3. Let's see.

Martin says

A remarkable book that provides a good snapshot of the British Empire as it was in 1897, and which really helps one's understanding of the magnitude, extent, impact, and influence of the Empire.

Lots of interesting facts (about England, the Empire, and its many colonies); and a very readable book, except maybe for the last 25-odd pages, which were trying my patience (chapters 25 & 26). Did I also detect on the author's part a little bias against the Irish?

William King says

A very fine, impressionistic history of the high water mark of the British Empire by a writer who was quite obviously besotted with it. Morris can really write and catches the very well the glamour of the Empire as well as its tawdriness.
