

## Reviews

### Devil's Rope

**Olivier Razac, (translated by Jonathan Kneight), *Barbed Wire: A History*, Profile Books, 148 pages, ISBN 186 197 455 8, £6.99**

In this concise and copiously illustrated, postcard-sized book French philosopher Olivier Razac has produced an absorbing and thoroughly invigorating history of the 'devil's rope.' Razac might not be the first to interpret enclosure as an unambiguously political act which 'marks out the boundaries of private property, assists in the effective management of land, and makes social distinctions concrete.' Indeed, his thesis, that barbed wire polarises and delimits space, effectively demarcating 'a threatening exterior and a protective interior' may appear familiar to many. However, it is in his application of this analysis to barbed wire's crucial historical role in creating spaces of life affirming inclusion and murderous exclusion which really distinguishes Razac's book.

Although *Barbed Wire* makes no pretence to provide a comprehensive history, Razac's choice of three historical 'landmarks' where 'the clearest and most significant political implications' of its use can be seen, are particularly apposite: the American prairie, the trenches of the First World War and the Nazi concentration camps. Charting its evolution from seemingly benign agricultural tool to 'the frontier between life and death,' Razac notes that the key ingredient in the prolonged success of barbed wire has been due not to technical refinement but rather its unerring simplicity. Barbed wire as we know it today was the invention of Joseph F. Glidden, an Illinois farmer whose 1874 innovation engendered a 'veritable revolution' on the prairie by providing incoming settlers with a cheap, durable way of colonising inhospitable land and protecting it from herds of cattle, thus accelerating Westward expansion through the Great Plains; a process which, thanks largely to barbed wire, was completed within twenty years.

But the popularity of barbed wire was not without consequence. America was not, as the philosopher John Locke suggested, *terra nullius*. However, such sentiments had a devastating effect for they eventually enclosed the Indian, his lands and his civilisation out of existence. And deliberately so for the enclosure of the Great Plains heralded the arrival of private property and the demise of the communal patterns of land ownership which characterised Indian civilisation. Together with the railroad and a handful of government edicts legalising the theft of tribal lands, barbed wire played an integral role in the ruthless pulverisation of Indian civilisation, forcing it further and further to the geographical margins until it could exist no more. Ironically, it also led to the collapse of the 'cattle empire' amidst a series of 'barbed-wire wars.' When the open range disappeared, so too did that quintessentially American figure, the cowboy. The attendant irony, that the (mythic) cowboy has come to be imbued with precisely those attributes which barbed wire and genocide succeeded in eradicating, is not lost upon Razac.

Moving to the First World War, Razac, a Frenchman, concentrates perhaps unsurprisingly upon the experience of *Les Poilus* and particularly the iconography of *les barbelés* as revealed in the newsletters of their veterans associations. The psychological and physical suffering caused by barbed wire is indelibly etched onto memories of its survivors, and in this sense has become part of the 'aesthetic' of the battlefield. Indeed Razac might easily have chosen any nation as his subject, for the encounter of the deadly impenetrability of the 'cruel tangles' (Siegfried Sassoon) was universal. Virtually invulnerable to artillery fire, barbed wire was lethal for those troops unfortunate enough to be caught upon this 'unplashed hedge' where untold legions 'paid the bill' (Edmund Blunden).

As Razac also shows, barbed wire supplied the 'central element' in the architecture of the Nazi concentration camps where 'it provided the essential foundation of the totalitarian management of space.' Here the use of barbed wire aided immeasurably the 'physical realisation' of Nazi genocide. As a graphic symbol of political violence and barbarous captivity (electrified) barbed wire served to stigmatise, atomise and compartmentalise the inmates of the concentration camp by dividing nationalities and races both from 'normal society' and one another, exacerbating their dehumanisation in the process and causing barbed wire to revert to its original purpose: the enclosure 'animals' worthy only of annihilation.

Since 1945 barbed wire has continued to oppress. Indeed the skeletal figures behind the barbed wire fences of Omarsk in Yugoslavia provided a pungent reminder of the long shadow of racial barbarity stalking Europe's recent past. Yet the anxiety caused by such images has failed to stop barbed wire enveloping the occupied territories, or the multiplicity of refugee camps which radiate from it. Barbed wire it seems is destined to remain omnipresent even within Europe whose own frontiers, though no longer ringed by barbed wire, contain pockets of a hostile 'exterior' which proliferate in the form of 'reception centres' and 'holding camps' for refugees and asylum seekers. Perhaps it is nowhere more prevalent than in Cyprus where 115 miles of barbed wire mark the 'last wall in Europe.'

Yet, despite this continued ubiquity, Razac makes a number of astute observations regarding the future modalities of repression. Barbed wire, argues Razac, came into being at a 'decisive stage' in history when 'power was already rejecting the thickness of stones, massive separations, to create territorial divisions.' Thus light, mobile and temporal razor wire replaced ramparts. However, whilst barbed wire has remained a potent symbol of oppression, (indeed one need look no further than Amnesty International's logo), barbed wire has become intensely unpopular; to compensate, more 'ethereal means' of controlling space have been found. Optical and electronic surveillance, of which face recognition technology is only the most obvious manifestation, have begun to segregate our shopping precincts and communities, argues Razac, intensifying our immobility and creating a socio-economic and racial 'no man's-land' into which human refuse is consigned. Although these exclusive social hierarchies are well hidden by such 'discreet violence', they are no less rigidly organised for

their invisibility. As Razac cogently argues, our walls may now be made of glass rather than barbed wire, but they are walls nonetheless.

*Graham Macklin*

## Christian Empires

**Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made The Modern World*, Allen Lane, 392 pages, hardback ISBN 0713996153 £25**

**Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World*, Fourth Estate, 454 pages, paperback ISBN 1841152765 £8.99**

‘The Europeans came to our land with their Bibles; and they taught us to close our eyes and pray, and when we opened our eyes, we had the Bibles and they had the land.’

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu, on being awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace*

Two books coming out with similar subtitles claim for the Scots the making of the modern world, but the one assumes that the basis was belief in Christian values and the other that it was the search for rational principles. Although they may both see in commerce the vehicle of civilisation, they make a fascinating contrast. There is one further difference between the two books. The second is a serious academic, albeit very readable, study by an American professor of history of the profound influence of a small group of Scottish thinkers, writers and inventors at the end of the Eighteenth Century. The first is also by a professor of history, this time at Oxford University, which is frankly a piece of popularising for a wide readership. The book is quite beautifully illustrated with many full-page colour prints and has been produced in association with a Channel Four series of television programmes.

It has become the practice of university professors of history – a practice not entirely to be decried – to present themselves on television chasing round the countryside, in Niall Ferguson’s case the whole world, to bring the past into our view in a fresh and arresting manner. Ferguson has not only a good sense of place, but he and his associates at Channel Four, who initiated the book and the series, have an impeccable sense of timing. In a review of his own book in the *New Statesman* (17.02.03), Ferguson makes it clear that the lesson of his book is for the man he calls ‘A Victorian Idealist in the White House’. ‘The US’, he avers, ‘does not stand to gain a great deal from controlling the oilfields of Iraq ... No, the culture of imperialism would not be so enduring if it did not have some genuine moral content.’ Ferguson writes of President George W. Bush: ‘He struck precisely the right, spine-tingling note of righteous vengefulness in his response to 9/11.’ That was when Bush called for a ‘crusade’. And he praises Blair for the religious fervour of his speech at the 2001 Labour Party Conference, when he spoke of the need to ‘reorder this world around us’.. ‘bringing

democracy and freedom' to the peoples. It might, he says, have been David Livingstone speaking.

### **A Christian Empire?**

Ferguson's thesis is that the British Empire was built by men (very few women) who truly believed that they were helping and enlightening those 'new-caught sullen peoples/ Half devil and half child.' of Kipling's 'Take up the White Man's Burden'. This poem, which is reproduced on the last pages of Ferguson's *Empire*, was written by Kipling in 1899 in the middle of the disastrous Boer War and was a direct appeal to the United States to shoulder its imperial responsibilities. Of course, it is true that many of Britain's imperialists did genuinely believe in the moral purpose of empire. The Webbs and their fellow members of the *Coefficients* dining club certainly did – after all Beatrice nearly married Joseph Chamberlain. It is much to her credit that she didn't. Commerce, as Ferguson insists, was designed to introduce civilisation with the sanction of Christianity.

Ferguson is quite open about the horrors of the slave trade, about the profits of the opium trade with Hong Kong, about the violence of the colonial wars, about the vicious suppression of the Indian Mutiny, about the massacre at Amritsar, about the bombing of Arab villages, about British racism and all the terrible stories we associate with imperial conquest. If he insists then, as he does, that it was all – or nearly all – done with the best of intentions, it is hard not to add hypocrisy to the list of accusations against imperialism. It is no more acceptable today to ask the people of Iraq to undergo bombardment from Bush, in Ferguson's words, 'because of his faith; not because of "Big Oil" but because of even bigger ideals.' Ferguson happily compares American destruction of the Taliban in Afghanistan and bombing of Belgrade or Baghdad in the name of 'human rights' with the British massacre of the Mahdi dervishes at Omdurman bringing 'justice' to a rogue regime or the Royal Navy's raids on the West African coast as part of the campaign to end the slave trade.

There are two fatal weaknesses in the message that Niall Ferguson has for Messrs Bush and Blair to learn from the history of the British Empire, to combine 'commerce, Christianity and civilisation'. The first is that Ferguson fails to show when conflicts arose between commerce and morality that the latter always prevailed. And I shall have more to say about that. The second is to suppose that the United States has any intention of establishing a world empire in the sense of the rule of freedom and democracy in the countries which it suborns. The world aim of the United States government has been clearly stated by its highest military authorities as 'full spectrum dominance' on land, sea, air and in the stratosphere. The aim of British statesmen in the Nineteenth Century was to bring as much of the world as its widespread navy and quite limited armed strength could encompass within the reach of British trade and investment. The advance of military technology and especially of nuclear weapons, combined with the enormous disparity of wealth between the United States and the rest of the world since the Second World War, has made it possible for the United States

to demand of the world's peoples quite simply that they do what its government requires – or else!

After the bombing of Iraq General Tommy Franks may be placed for a time in Baghdad with a major United States military force, but the actual ruling of the country will be left to local bureaucrats and some international presence, whose only requirement will be that they conform to the demands of Washington. That is surely the lesson of previous American involvement in 'peace-keeping' in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, or Central Asia. Freedom and democracy will be an optional extra. Of course, much of the British Empire was ruled indirectly, especially, as Ferguson describes, the Princely states of India, but there was an attempt there, as he rightly insists, to establish the rule of law. Ask the Serbs in Kosovo about that. When American military bases are established in Saudi Arabia, Kosovo, Afghanistan or Uzbekistan, President Bush's promise to 'remember our calling as a blessed country to make this world better' and 'confound the designs of evil men' seems soon to be forgotten. There could hardly be on earth a more evil man than President Karimov of Uzbekistan, whose regime has been condemned by Human Rights Watch and one in which the British ambassador has claimed that 'brutality is inherent'.

The assumption of the British imperialists was basically racist – that the coloured peoples were not only hapless infidels, but incapable of ruling themselves or of technological advance without the white man's rule and instruction. To assume this required not only a complete ignorance of history, of the Egyptian, Indian or Chinese civilisations, but a deliberate burying of history in Africa or Latin America and even in India. It is astonishing that Ferguson can write about the Eighteenth Century Indian textile industry without quoting Robert Clive's own description of the wealth of Dacca, comparable to London at the time (now the capital of Bangladesh, today one the poorest countries in the world). Again and again Ferguson underestimates the level of economic development achieved already in the countries which Britain conquered and omits entirely to mention forms of self-government already attained, for example in the Asante Parliament in what is now Ghana. He can even refer to the 'recaptive' slaves in Sierra Leone without discussing their merchants, their schools, universities, hospitals, newspapers, theatres, in the mid-Nineteenth Century, which British colonial rule set out to destroy by the end of the century.

Ferguson's main line of argument about the British Empire is that in fact it was indeed a burden and not a benefit to Britain. It depends what you are referring to as Britain. I have always argued in my books that, after the initial stages of plunder, which established the division between the developed and developing world, the benefits for the British who had to fight the wars and suffer unemployment because of the impoverishment of colonial markets, was very limited. The benefits for the rich were enormous and there was not much 'trickle down' effect. Ferguson sees the great contribution of Britain to the empire in the export of skilled people, amongst whom he numbers several Scottish cousins, and in the export of capital. Both went almost wholly to the United States and to

what became the self-governing dominions – Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. He fails to recognise that most of the United Kingdom's capital accumulation overseas was the result of reinvestment of profits year by year. Keynes once calculated that the gold brought back by Francis Drake to Queen Elizabeth I, reinvested year by year at 5% would just about amount to the value of Britain's foreign investment stock in the 1930s. Nor does Ferguson recognise that much of this stock was the result of switching investment from profits made in India and other colonial territories.

One justification adduced by Ferguson for British colonial rule is that it was not half as bad as that in the other empires – Dutch, Belgian, French, Russian, German, Italian, Japanese. It is a somewhat double-edged compliment. What he is particularly impressed by is the speed with which Britain withdrew from empire. He attributes this to the 'propelling force ... of rival empires [German, Japanese, Russian and American] more than indigenous nationalists', although he concedes that the costs of empire, after Britain's financial sacrifices in taking on the German and Japanese at first alone in the Second World War, were increased by 'nationalist insurgency and new military technology'. Ferguson sees the 'symbolic reversal of world history' in the Japanese use of British prisoners to build the Burma railway, when the British had used coolie labour to build their railways all over the world. But he does not ask the obvious question whether this was not the inevitable result of centuries of white men treating other colours as their slaves.

### **From Colony to Empire**

The real historical irony of Britain's loss of empire to the United States – one-time British colony – is not lost on Ferguson. But in asking modern governments of the United States to learn from the British Empire, he is misled. Not only does the colonial origin of the United States of America make empire building anathema, and American superiority in modern technology make it unnecessary, but the religious conviction which Ferguson recognises and approves in President Bush is of a very different nature from that of Queen Victoria's imperialists. Something of the same racism and evangelicalism may be found in both, but the sources are different. British racism until the last 50 years arose from ignorance, from general antipathy to the 'other', to foreigners in general. American racism is based on knowledge, of the very real competition for employment. Similarly, British evangelicalism arose and still arises from an instinct of communal charity towards others, slaves or starving children, sufficiently far away to be no threat. American religion, especially of the 'born again' Christians is intensely personal, concerned with self-improvement and with it the belief that others should be free to do likewise.

One of the central threads in Arthur Herman's brilliant study of the Scottish Enlightenment is the dual source in that remarkable juncture of ideas in Scotland at the end of the Eighteenth Century – the Calvinist belief in God-given personal rectitude and the all embracing rationalism of inquiring minds. This dualism can even be seen in the division of the Scots in the American war of independence

between the rebellious Ulster Scots and the loyalist Scots from the Highlands. But the founding fathers combined the two – the frontiersman’s belief in the defence of his rights, in the last resort with a gun and the balanced consideration that common sense will prevail – we need only to recite the opening words of the American Declaration of Independence:

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’.

Only the disciples of David Hume and Thomas Reid of Edinburgh could have written those words, and James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and James Wilson were just such disciples.

The result for one-time colonial Americans is that they felt – and still feel – that they were born with a kind of protective personal ‘liberty jacket’, which they will defend by arms if necessary and which they can sell to the rest of the world. James Madison, agonising over the problem of assuring to such citizens non-oppressive popular rule by a self-governing republic ruling over a country of truly continental scope, had read Hume’s ‘Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth’. He concluded that the only way to prevent such a republic becoming an empire and therefore acquisitive and corrupt was to balance power between the executive, legislative and judiciary. Virtual gridlock would protect the citizen’s liberties. What Madison did not foresee was that private corporate power amounting to what General Eisenhower called a ‘military-industrial complex’ could begin to finance political parties and determine election results. So it is that today the Executive, the President, can now buy almost absolute power and realise the dreams of the military industrial complex for establishing world power, not by empire, but by ‘full spectrum dominance’. Something remains however of the ‘liberty belt’ in that US citizens can be persuaded that this is what they are exporting to the rest of the world. This is what makes it possible to win support for Bush’s provocative stance in threatening war on Iraq. Americans do really feel that they are a ‘blessed country’. But Niall Ferguson is wrong to suggest that this provides a moral argument such as Tony Blair is presenting as the excuse for bombing Iraq.

The American Revolution was indeed inspired by the Scottish Enlightenment, and the English rebels – Tom Paine, Shelley, William Godwin and Mary Wolstonecraft – who welcomed the revolution drew their inspiration from the same source, and it had nothing to do with Christianity. Adam Smith, one of the central figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, who is now regarded as the founding father of modern capitalism, condemned empire and far from encouraging the infinite division of labour in large scale commerce, saw in this that ‘the minds of men are contracted and rendered incapable of elevation.’ Arthur Herman explains at length what some of us have been arguing for a long time, from a careful reading of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well as of his *Wealth of Nations*, that Smith uses his concept of the ‘invisible hand’ partly in irony, but mostly to emphasise his belief in what he called the ‘fellow feeling’

of human beings which governed their conduct. America's giant corporations can take no comfort from Adam Smith's morality.

Herman sums up his view of the Scottish Enlightenment in a moving paragraph at the end of his book:

'As the first modern nation and culture, the Scots have by and large made the world a better place. They taught the world that true liberty requires a sense of personal obligation as well as individual rights. They showed that modern life can be spiritually as well as materially fulfilling. They showed how a respect for science and technology can combine with a love for the arts, how private affluence can enhance a sense of civic responsibility, how political and economic democracy can flourish side by side, and how a confidence in the future depends on a reverence for the past. The Scottish mind grasped how, in Hume's words, 'liberty is the perfection of civil society', but 'authority must be acknowledged essential to its very existence'; and how a strong faith in progress also requires a keen appreciation of its limitations.'

Born again Christians may usurp the sentiments and spin the words, but we shall judge them by their deeds.

*Michael Barratt Brown*

## Mapping the Megapower

**William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, Zed Books, 2002, 336 pages, hardback ISBN 1 84277 220 1 £36.95 paperback ISBN 1 84277 221 X £9.99**

William Blum tells us that he left the State Department in 1967. He opposed what the United States was doing in Vietnam. Since then he has chronicled the nefarious actions of the World's Only Megapower in many corners of the globe.

First published in 2000, this new and updated edition of *Rogue State* will interest all students of Full Spectrum Dominance. Not because Blum elaborates official US military doctrine, although Full Spectrum Dominance is mentioned in connection with the militarisation of space, but because he paints an extraordinary canvas which sets the context for the emergence of such grotesque aspirations.

Blum's broad themes are encapsulated in his book's three main sections: 'Love/Hate Relationships with Terrorists and Human-Rights Violators'; 'United States Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction'; 'A Rogue State versus the World'. All three are immediately relevant to our present dilemma. To these has been added an introductory essay on 9/11 and the bombing of Afghanistan.

*Rogue State* is a basic work of reference for the peace movement world-wide. It is written in an engaging manner by a long-time and well-informed dissident.

*Tony Simpson*



## Whose Clangers?

**Naomi Klein, *Fences and Windows, Flamingo*, paperback ISBN 0007150474  
£8.99**

Naomi Klein, who established her name with her best seller, *No Logo*, has collected some of her recent articles and speeches under this heading, implying both the obstacles and the opportunities facing the World Social Forum. Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* has greeted this new book in the pages of *Prospect* (February 2003, p.73) under the title of 'Klein's Clangers', with what I am sure he believes to be a quite devastating put-down – 'arrogant, paranoid, wrong', 'immature', 'hard to tolerate', 'no analysis worthy of the name', 'ancient chestnuts', 'spoiled children of the West' are just some of the insults he hurls at her, in deriding her supposed 'clangers'. Something must have got under his skin.

Wolf decries Klein's critique of the present workings of capitalism, and especially of the World Trade Organisation, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, multinational companies, and pharmaceutical companies as 'a messy mix of populism, anarchism and utopian socialism'. He assumes that this critique means that the protesters at Seattle onwards see no other alternatives than those of Fidel Castro and Subcomandante Marcos, who would scrap all markets and replace representative democracy with mass meetings. By contrast, Wolf believes that 'capitalism [is] the most successful economic system in history; that abandoning markets and profitability, as he assumes Soviet Communism did, delivered only 'tyranny and poverty', that far from democracy being in a bad way he quotes United Nations Development Programme figures to show that in the last 15 years the number of democracies in the world has jumped from 44 to 82, that it is only in underdeveloped economies with mass illiteracy that you find 'demagogy, clientelism and corruption', in strong contrast to the experience in the advanced economies.

What Martin Wolf thinks about the corruption at Enron and other giant US companies, about the withholding of AIDS drugs by the pharmaceutical companies, about the open purchase of votes in the United Nations Security Council by the United States government for its war with Iraq, about the increasing poverty and inequality in large parts of the capitalist world including the advanced economies, about the widespread destruction of the environment by uncontrolled capitalist exploitation, he does not tell us. It is true that the worldwide movement of protest at these outrages has not yet led to the formulation of clear alternatives. But the fact that the capitalist system has had great successes in the past tells us nothing about what human societies will need in the future.

*Michael Barratt Brown*

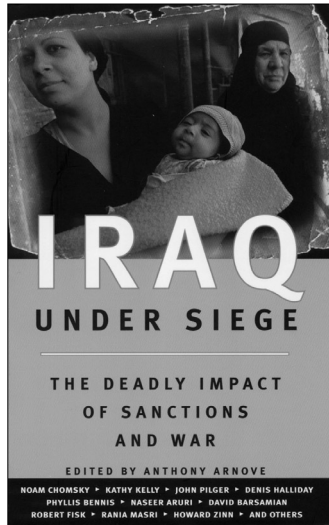
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