Reynolds's News and Miscellany

HISTORY, LITERATURE, POETRY, AND LITERARY CRITICISM

10 December 2023

Bruce Gilley's *The Case for Colonialism* (2023)

Stephen Basdeo

SUMMARY: I review Bruce Gilley's *The Case for Colonialism*, linking its argument to George W. M. Reynolds, who could oppose prejudice while supporting imperial expansion in the name of progress. Gilley argues that nineteenth-century colonial rule improved security, health, living conditions, and governance, and proposes that troubled regions might replicate colonial institutions or accept external administration. He insists that such arrangements should have the consent of populations and that "colonialism" should be named rather than disguised with softer terms. I praise the book's data and challenge to anti-colonial scholarship, particularly its scrutiny of citations and its attack on Adam Hochschild's account of King Leopold's Congo. Gilley disputes evidence for ten million deaths and argues that photographs and population estimates have been misrepresented. I find this critique persuasive enough to revisit Hochschild, but ultimately I was left with an unresolved practical question: why would voters in a colonial power consent to the costs and risks of recolonization?

*

INTRODUCTION

Bruce Gilley, *The Case for Colonialism* (Nashville, TN: New English Review Press, 2023), pp. 322 RRP £29.99 HB £17.99 PB ISBN 978-1943003891

In 1837 the Victorian radical republican author George W.M. Reynolds wrote an article in the *Monthly Magazine* which urged the French to take possession of the region of Constantine in modern-day Algeria.[1] Such a measure would increase French trading interests but more importantly civilise (or as we might say today: modernise) the economically backward quasi-feudal polity that existed then. In short, French colonisation of Constantine would bring this most important North African country into the modern nineteenth century.

[1] George W.M. Reynolds, 'Constantina: or, the importance of its occupation by the French', *Monthly Magazine*, March 1837, 228–35 (228).

Now, before anyone who reads the above is tempted to cry that Reynolds was a typical old Victorian racist, let us remember that among Victorian radicals he was probably among the few who were defiantly anti-racist. Not only did he mount brilliant public defences of the Jewish people at a time of rampant antisemitism (for which Jewish associations thanked him)[2] but he also attacked the anti-black racism which infected the minds of so many of his countrymen who viewed black people as inferior to Europeans—this was that 'demoralizing idea' which he denounced in the preface to his novel *Grace Darling* (1839).[3] The high level of respect which he had for Islamic culture, and which he communicated in several novels and short stories, should also speak for itself.[4]

The idea that a Victorian like Reynolds could be non- or anti-racist yet at the same time urge a European nation to colonize another part of the earth may strike some modern observers as contradictory. Modern anti-colonial scholars wrongly have us believe that every Victorian who expressed even a partial endorsement of imperialism (even if they likewise denounced some of the violence that occurred along the way) was an evil racist.

Yet Reynolds was a man who, yes, was anti-racist but also a believer in progress. At the very beginning of the *Mysteries of London* (1844–48) he waxes lyrical over the improvements that modern CIVILIZATION has brought to the world:

> BETWEEN the 10th and 13th centuries Civilisation withdrew from Egypt and Syria, rested for a little space at Constantinople, and then passed away to the western climes of Europe. From that period these climes have been the grand laboratory in which Civilisation has wrought out refinement in every art and every science, and whence it has diffused its benefits over the earth. It has taught commerce to plough the waves of every sea with the adventurous keel; it has enabled handfuls of disciplined warriors to subdue the mighty armaments of oriental princes; and its daring sons have planted its banners amidst the eternal ice of the poles. It has cut down the primitive forests of America; carried trade into the interior of Africa; annihilated time and distance by the aid of steam; and now contemplates how to force a passage through Suez and Panama. The bounties of Civilisation are at present almost everywhere recognised. Nevertheless, for centuries has Civilisation established, and for centuries will it maintain, its headquarters in the great cities of Western Europe.[5]

The centre of civilization for Reynolds was in Europe. Civilization, trade, culture, and scientific advancement across the world (which of course had an ugly side at times) proceeded in tandem with European colonialism. Colonial rule for Reynolds was superior to what existed in certain regions before the establishment of colonial rule. In a similar (yet slightly different) vein Prof. Bruce Gilley poses a new question for all fair-minded scholars to consider today: Is there a way to restart colonialism for some troubled regions of the world? In short, can a modern form of colonialism be resurrected which preserves its benefits? Such questions are behind Gilley's new book: *The Case for Colonialism* (2023).

---

[2] Anon., 'Mr. G.W.M. Reynolds and the Jews', *Reynolds's Miscellany*, 20 May 1848, 448.
[3] George W.M. Reynolds, *Grace Darling* (London: G. Henderson, 1839), vi.
[4] See, for example: George W.M. Reynolds, *Omar: A Tale of the War* (London: John Dicks, 1856); George W.M. Reynolds, *The Loves of the Harem: A Romance of Constantinople* (London: John Dicks, 1856).
[5] George W.M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, 4 vols (London: G. Vickers, 1844–48), I, 1.

THE C-WORD

I read Gilley's book, at times, when the television was on in the background, oftentimes as news of the Israel-Hamas War filtered into my ears. In the United Kingdom, various protest groups have called for both the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Leader of the Opposition Keir Starmer to call for a ceasefire. It seems that the desire for foreign intervention into the affairs of other states is alive and well among self-professed anti-colonials who would normally argue that any other kind of intervention is mere 'white saviorism'.[6] When calls for a ceasefire do not come from either the government or the opposition, Starmer and Sunak are lambasted for 'not doing enough'. In some ways, the same kind of contradictory demands are made of European colonialism. As Gilley states:

> Eminent scholars repeatedly make the logically contradictory claim that colonialism was both too disruptive and not disruptive enough, whether with regard to boundaries, governing institutions, economic systems, or social structures (42).

Evidently, Gilley advocates for a much more intrusive form of modern colonialism. Yet why use that word? Had Gilley called his latest research project something like 'The Case for the External Intervention and Management of Other Countries' it is unlikely that he would have been 'cancelled'. He was bolder than I would dare be and, in a 2017 article in the *Third World Quarterly* (the thesis of which the current book revises and extends), he used the dread c-word 'colonialism'.

Now, back in 2017 I remember the online furore which kicked off when Gilley's article was first published and I saw the usual denunciations of racism, the faux-intellectual ripostes to Gilley's thesis, and the drama over the retraction and then eventual republication on the National Association of Scholars' website.[7] Much of the criticism was quite dramatic. Hamid Dabashi, a Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University thundered that Gilley "must be ostracised, publicly shamed and humiliated, and never ever called 'a colleague', who should be politely invited for a 'civilized debate'." (65)

Gilley must have had an inkling that his use of the C-World would be controversial so why, then, did Gilley opt for the much bolder title containing the word 'colonialism' instead of just 'foreign intervention'? There are several reasons for this but first, to explain it properly, let us understand his idea of colonialism in depth.

The first thing to note is that when Gilley uses colonialism as a model for imitation, he draws specifically upon post-Napoleonic era empires, particularly those of Britain, France, Germany and, to a lesser extent, Belgium. Here Gilley is largely in step with historians, who do indeed agree that the nature of imperialism in the nineteenth century (which increasingly favoured direct rule) was much different to the old mercantile empires of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pioneered by European joint-stock companies. Such companies, Gilley remarks, were 'empires on the cheap' and *not* a model for imitation in the modern era (175). The case for modern colonialism therefore has to be a case for the improvement and modernisation of economically and politically backward regions, which was the explicit aim of the Berlin Conference of 1884–85. As Article 6 of the Berlin Agreement stated

> All the Powers exercising sovereign rights or influence in the aforesaid territories bind themselves to watch over the preservation of the native tribes, and to care for

---

[6] Yara Hawari, 'UK Labour's Failure to Call for a Gaza Ceasefire Is Not Surprising', *Al Jazeera*, 20 November 2023 https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/11/20/uk-labours-failure-to-call-for-a-gaza-ceasefire-is-not-surprising [still live as of 26 October 2026]. Al Jazeera

[7] Bruce Gilley, 'The Case for Colonialism', *Academic Questions*, 31.2 (2018), 167–85, https://academicquestions.org/the-case-for-colonialism/ [accessed 26 October 2026].

> the improvement of the conditions of their moral and material well-being, and to help in suppressing slavery, and especially the slave trade. They shall, without distinction of creed or nation, protect and favour all religious, scientific or charitable institutions and undertakings created and organized for the above ends, or which aim at instructing the natives and bringing home to them the blessings of civilization. Christian missionaries, scientists and explorers, with their followers, property and collections, shall likewise be the objects of especial protection. Freedom of conscience and religious toleration are expressly guaranteed to the natives, no less than to subjects and to foreigners. The free and public exercise of all forms of divine worship, and the right to build edifices for religious purposes, and to organize religious missions belonging to all creeds, shall not be limited or fettered in any way whatsoever.

Nineteenth century imperialism, especially after the Berlin Conference, was self-consciously humanitarian and modernising. A modern colonialism should likewise be thus and Gilley contends that his 'case for colonialism' is an argument for the development of certain troubled regions and creating out of them fully functioning liberal democracies. A trusteeship in which good governance creates a modern nation state,

> The case for European colonialism is simple. It is the case for humanity itself, for the ways that human beings have always acted rationally to better their situations in life and those of their children … It is the case for peace, progress, and running water. It is the case for living in a place where life is better and escaping from a place where life is worse. It is the case for human agency and freedom. In short, it is a humble submission to the facts of life rather than the worked up intellectual fantasies of the scholar class (16).

The benefits brought by colonialism were many, according to Gilley. He goes into these throughout the book, all of which points are supported by relevant data, as one can see below with the measurement of living standards in two German colonies before and after colonization (real wages in British Colonial Africa also increased between between 1880 and 1965). But to sum up, in Gilley's own words, in addition to the abolition of slavery which had disappeared by the mid-nineteenth century:

> It brought untold security and peace to formerly conflict-prone territories, generated rapid gains in health and material well-being, initiated the documentation and celebration of local cultures, created pathways to accountability and self-government, freed hundreds of thousands of slaves, and protected women and minorities from exploitation (170).

To this end, Gilley makes three recommendations. First, governments and people in troubled developing countries should replicate (as far as possible) the colonial governance of their pasts, much as Singapore, Belize, and Botswana have done (39). Second, some regions should in fact be recolonized by Western countries or 'encouraged to hold power in specific governance areas' such as criminal justice and the management of public finances (40). And in answer to the question about 'why *colonialism*', Gilley argues that, "ather than speak in euphemisms about 'shared sovereignty' or 'neo-trusteeship', such actions should be called 'colonialism' because it would embrace rather than evade the historical record" (40). There should be, therefore, a recognition of the numerous benefits which

colonialism of old brought which have been erased or simply lied about by anti-colonial figures and their cheerleaders in the academy.

JUNK CITATIONS AND FALSE HISTORIES

Of course, finding the benefits of colonialism in any history book published after the 1980s is probably quite difficult and reading Gilley's book was eye-opening because it revealed the extent to which many of these modern anti-colonial history books rely on junk citations and outright lies. Gilley's book serves not only to argue for a new humanitarian colonialism (an argument which people will take or reject as they see fit), then, but also as a literature review and critique of current anticolonial scholarly works.

At times, the critique of anticolonial scholars' statements is delivered with more than a pinch of sarcasm. While I do not think it was necessary to have two chapters devoted to the backlash against Gilley's original 2017 article, I suppose that, had Gilley not included these two chapters we would have been bereft of his often cutting descriptions of his cancellers such as the 'dime-a-dozen activist' English Literature professor Kanika Batra (129).

However, there are more serious critiques of his critics in the book than name calling. For example, one of Gilley's critics in 2017, Brandon Kendhammer, wrote that 'Central Africa lost as much as one third of its population during the early years of colonial rule'.[8] In support of this statistic Kendhammer cited an article by Jan Vansina titled 'Deep-down Time: Political Tradition in Central Africa'.[9] Vansina cited a Harvard study from 1928 examining the Belgian Congo colony founded in 1908 (which does not deal with the whole of central Africa from the Cameroons to Mozambique but only with Belgian territory). Vansina misquoted this Harvard reference which was quoting a report on the Belgian Congo in 1919 which actually disproved the claim that the population of Congo had been reduced by a half. Thus, "Kendhammer's vast condemnation of European colonialism as a near genocidal enterprise thus refers to a study that reaches no such conclusion" (93).

THE GHOST OF KING LEOPOLD

Perhaps one of the most valuable chapters in Gilley's book, however, is its takedown (or utter destruction) of American journalist Adam Hochschild's book titled *King Léopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1998): its central argument is that, at over 10 million deaths, genocide was perpetrated by King Léopold in the Congo.[10] It is a book that has been lauded and frequently cited by scholars to point out the destructive side of Belgian colonialism and, more broadly, European colonialism. Gilley has read it, however, and followed up all the references and confidently declares that it is a 'vast hoax' (191).

King Léopold's private domain in the Congo was founded in 1885 and handed over to the Belgian government in 1908. The area was to be opened to trade and slavery eliminated. The État Independant du Congo was born. This new state, the EIC, was not a colony but envisioned as a fully independent sovereign state and its affairs were not decided by the Belgian government. An area a third of the size of the United States, the EIC's control—with just 1,500 administrators and 19,000 police officers—did not stretch very far initially. Much of the territory nominally under EIC control was actually presided over by African warlords. Thus, Hochschild's claim about Léopold's 'totalitarianism' in the EIC is hard to sustain when faced with the daily reality (194).

---

[8] Brandon Kendhammer, 'A Controversial Article Praises Colonialism. But Colonialism's Real Legacy Was Ugly', *The Washington Post*, 19 September 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/19/colonialism-left-behind-a-long-legacy-most-of-it-bad/ [accessed 26 October 2026]. The Washington Post

[9] Jan Vansina, 'Deep-down Time: Political Tradition in Central Africa', *History in Africa*, 16 (1989), 341–62 https://doi.org/10.2307/3171791.

[10] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

By 1891, the EIC was on the verge of bankruptcy and Léopold declared, in lieu of taxes (for the place did not boast a modern economy) a state monopoly on and a mandatory contribution of 15% of national produce of rubber and ivory. This was to be harvested to pay for the territory's government (including healthcare and education, and interventions against tribal war and slavery). In the majority of areas, rubber was harvested with ease while in other more remote places, with less supervision, it was harder to collect. Overzealous African collectors in these parts resorted to cutting off hands as punishment for not meeting the quota. In other places, lacking direct supervision from Europeans,

> Native soldiers kidnapped women or killed men to exact revenge. When they fell into skirmishes, they sometimes followed a long-standing Arab and African traditions by cutting off the hands or feet of the fallen … How many locals died in the frays is unclear, but the confirmed cases might put the figure at about 10,000, a terrible number (195).

How, then, did 10,000 documented deaths in skirmishes between the EIC and Africans morph into a claim for 10 million deaths and an accusation of genocide in Hochschild's book? Apparently, Hochschild had read two sources: a remark by the American novelist Mark Twain, who claimed that 8-10 million people died in EIC as well as the findings of the aforementioned Jan Vansina, who in any case has recently corrected their own claim that there was a 50% reduction in the population. Vansina recently stated that their depopulation claim was an 'erroneous conclusion' (199).

It is important to note, too, that Gilley is not the only one who questions the claim of 10 million deaths. As historian Jean Stengers pointed out in the *Guardian*: "Terrible things happened, but Hochschild is exaggerating. It is absurd to say so many millions died."[11] In the same article, Leopold's British biographer, Barbara Emerson wrote of Hochschild's book that

> I think it is a very shoddy piece of work. Leopold did not start genocide. He was greedy for money and chose not to interest himself when things got out of control. Part of Belgian society is still very defensive. People with Congo connections say we were not so awful as that, we reformed the Congo and had a decent administration there.

The cutting off of limbs for not meeting quotas of course deserves some attention. Hochschild takes a throwaway remark from a Belgian administrator, mistranslates this remark, and argues that the policy of cutting off limbs was *officially sanctioned* by Léopold to confirm his thesis that Léopold's Congo constituted a 'forgotten Holocaust' (195). In actual fact, when Léopold learnt of these atrocities he declared, "If there are these abuses in the Congo, we must stop them. If they continue, it will be the end of the state" (195).

Only in 2023, after an article in which Gilley pointed out his mistranslation of the administrator's words, did Hochschild say that 'it should be corrected' (it is important to note that Hochschild also stands by other claims in his book, however, and you can read his defence of *King Léopold's Ghost*, and Gilley's subsequent argument against it here).[12]

---

[11] Stephen Bates, 'The Hidden Holocaust', *The Guardian*, 13 May 1999 https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/may/13/features11.g22 [accessed 26 October 2026]. The Guardian

[12] Adam Hochschild and Bruce Gilley, 'The Ghost Still Haunts', *The American Conservative*, 29 May 2023 https://www.theamericanconservative.com/the-ghost-still-haunts/ [accessed 26 October 2026]. The American Conservative

Gilley also points out that the photographic 'evidence' which Hochschild supplies of these atrocities in the Congo is also misused. The photos which Hochschild uses were taken from Alice Seeley's and John Weeks's photographs taken in the late nineteenth century. They were all staged to be exhibited to missionary societies in Britain (there were many Mrs Jellyby types among the missionary societies in England at the time who loved to part ways with their money after seeing a tearful exhibit on conditions overseas). Some of the photos used by Hochschild to illustrate abuses of Léopold's regime were actually photographed, before the EIC was established, with a view to documenting existing barbaric native practices (there is, for example, a photo of a man being whipped under Sharia Law) (196).

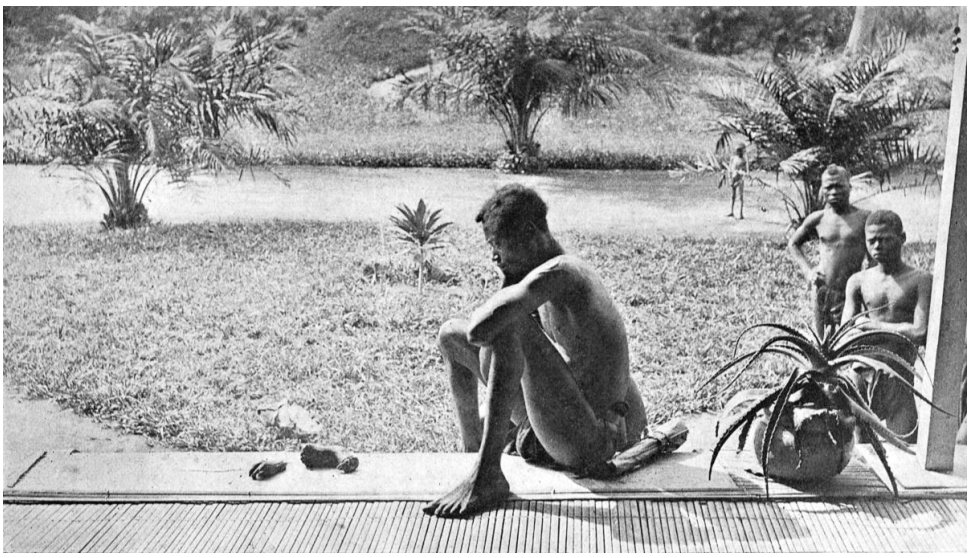


Figure 1: Sala of Wala and remains of his five year old daughter; both wife and child were eaten by king's soldiers at a cannibal feast. (Wikimedia Commons)

Perhaps most egregiously is Hochschild's repurposing of a photograph which even I, until now, believed was illustrative of King Léopold's brutal regime: Sala of Wala alongside severed hands and feet. The photograph (below) was originally published in E. D. Morel's *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* (1904). The original caption alongside the photograph read: "Sala of Wala and remains of his five year old daughter; both wife and child were eaten by king's soldiers at a cannibal feast." However, Hochschild, without any explanation, changed the caption to the following when he incorporated into his book:

> Nsala, of the district of Wala, looking at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, Boali, a victim of the Anglo-Belgian Rubber Company (A.B.I.R.) militia.

The first caption, as originally published, was clearly not intended to lay the blame for the severed hands on display at the feet of King Léopold. The second, fabricated caption by Hochschild, is quite clearly a lie.

ESTABLISHING LEGITIMACY

Interestingly, one charge in Hochschild's book is that Léopold's administration often did too little and too late in stamping out cruel non-European practices. As Gilley points out, this is classic anti-colonialist rhetoric. Empires, in modern progressive scholars' eyes, could not do right for doing wrong. Colonialism ended too soon, according

to Gilley, and it was not given the time it needed "to bring about the triple transformation: sustained economic growth, cultural modernization (the private sphere), and civic construction (the public sphere)" (141).

One charge often levelled against European colonialism, of course, is that whether it was intrusive or not, it was illegitimate and lacked the consent of the people. Therefore, European powers should never have been present in the first place to even attempt to bring about such transformations in developing societies. This is despite the fact that figures such as the King of Lagos in 1845.

> Humbly request[ed] that the Queen [Victoria] should take possession of this town and that she should place some person of authority here which would greatly contribute to our safety and the welfare of the country at large (12).

Lagos was not an isolated case of course; the Sultan of Brunei was (according to Gilley) happy to have a British administrator in charge. However, Gilley is clear: Any recolonization should be with the consent of the people concerned, much as it was in many (though not all) cases of colonialism in the nineteenth century; the fact that few Europeans were actually involved in running colonies in the period should of course be telling. As Ronald Robinson and Bouda Etemad argued all the way back in 1979 and 2007 respectively: all empires require a degree of collaboration and in many cases colonialism was most often a cooperative endeavour between colonialist and colonised peoples.[13]

It is important to note, too, that Gilley is not necessarily arguing only for Western powers to recolonize troubled regions (a fact which was lost on some of his critics in 2017). For true legitimacy, some of the more developed Middle Eastern states could take over the management of troubled ones nearby with which they share similar social and religious customs. The Gulf oil states might manage those wracked recently by civil war. European colonialism may provide a good model for any form of new colonialism, but the new colonialism will not necessarily be European.

Gilley's book is certainly thought-provoking. On the question of King Léopold it has certainly cleared up some of the myths which I had unquestioningly believed. I shall re-read Hochschild's book with a more critical eye in future. The data and range of sources with which Gilley makes his arguments are impressive yet the people who need to read Gilley's book (anticolonial scholars who are unwilling to admit that anything good might have come from European colonialism) probably will not read it.

I suppose, to finish off with this review, I am still left with one question which maybe Gilley can include a discussion of in future editions: Let us say that Gilley is correct and developed nations need to recolonize certain parts of the world which have experienced much trouble. Let us say that the consent of the people of a war torn region had indeed consented to be recolonised (and that is no easy task). So far, so good. Yet there is one question that Gilley does not answer. Gilley takes it as a given that colonising powers would want to recolonise other regions. The current Labour government certainly have taken an arms-length approach to dealing with the USA's recent skirmishes with Iran. Western governments are accountable to their voters.

But at the end of the book I was left wondering why I, a tax payer like myself—even as someone who takes what is perhaps a more (small c) conservative and patriotic view of the British Empire and its legacy—would ever vote for a British government who would pledge to spend mine and my countrymen and women's taxes (and possibly expend lives in the process) in recolonising somewhere. As a I cannot say that I would ever support such a thing, much less vote for it (the disasters of Iraq and Afghanistan weigh heavily on my mind). Any recolonisation would not only need the consent of the colonised but that of the colonising people too.

---

[13] Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration', in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. by Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (London, 1979) and Bouda Etemad, *Possessing the World: Taking the Measurements of Colonization from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Bergahn, 2007).