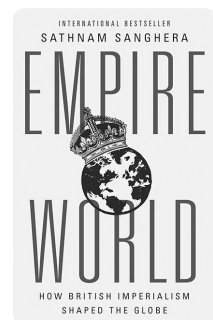


Review: *Empireworld* by Sathnam Sanghera

Nandini Das

(1) In the early 1730s, a new subscription craze transformed Georgian Britain. Every year, for five guineas, “Bartram’s box” would delight plant collectors and gardeners with seeds from among a hundred different North American species. The supply chain had a Pennsylvanian Quaker, John Bartram, at one end and another Quaker, English merchant Peter Collinson, at the other.

(2) The overpriced phlox and rudbeckia we now buy from garden centres in seasonal attempts to brighten up our outdoor spaces, the rhododendrons and magnolias that arrest our attention across the drabdest of streets, were all introduced to England thanks to their initiative. Collinson and Bartram’s subscriber list included dukes and earls who vied with each other to beautify their estates, but the pair were equally well connected beyond the movers and shakers of high society. Collinson was a member of the Royal Society and corresponded with the collector Hans Sloane and the botanist Carl Linnaeus. Bartram would later become one of the founding members of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, alongside Benjamin Franklin. When the combination of that impeccable social and intellectual network got Bartram an appointment as botanist to King George III in 1765, his plants would also find a home in the Royal Gardens at Kew.



(3) Sathnam Sanghera’s *Empireworld* tells the story of Bartram and Kew as part of a nuanced, complicated account of the British empire’s impact on the world as we know it, and it is a story that is strikingly, remarkably alive to 19. For example, the technologies that facilitated the transporting of the plants and seeds that changed the English landscape and accelerated modern plant science also drove the cultivation of indigo, sugar cane, and rubber, and thereby determined the destinies of countless thousands of enslaved and indentured labourers in British-owned plantations across the world. And these enterprises, leading as they did to the kind of large-scale ecological destruction whose effects are still felt today, also created a need for conservation movements and environmental activism. Neither global communication, nor global cuisines, would be the same without any of this.

(4) And it's not just the world of plants that was affected by Britain's colonial ambition. Writing in another chapter that investigates the extraordinary global prominence of British charities and non-governmental organisations, Sanghera identifies the same dynamics at work. Take hunting, for example. Its deep entanglement with ideas of English imperial masculinity was directly responsible for driving various animal species to the brink of extinction around the world. But it was equally the catalyst for the various charities that emerged in response, and for the codification of countless environmental protections. "It's all true, but the opposite is also true", as Sanghera puts it. History is not a balance sheet: sometimes it requires that we hold multiple truths in our mind simultaneously. Nations – and individuals – can do great evil at the same time as doing good. And that's where it gets complicated: sometimes doing what's considered evil can lead to good, and vice versa.

(5) The raking light that Sanghera throws across the contradictions at the heart of the story of empire doesn't come without some trepidation for the author. *Empireworld* is in some ways a sequel to his previous book, *Empireland*, where the discussion of imperialism's role in the making of Britain's past and present attracted a substantial backlash that included public and personal attacks. Sanghera deals with this backlash at the beginning of his first chapter, and he returns to it a few times subsequently. But his larger response is to spell out the complexity of historical assessment with painstaking clarity, showing, repeatedly, the deep entwinement of the positive and negative contributions of empire.

(6) The propagation of British legal and political frameworks is a case in point. In present-day Mauritius, Nigeria, and India, many of the most restrictive and divisive of state mechanisms, aimed at imposing and retaining the power of certain social groups at the cost of others, **22**. It is a credit to *Empireworld* that it does not turn away from that uncomfortable truth.

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