

Book Reviews

The Great Defiance How the World took on British Empire by David Veevers.

Introduction

While much has been written about how the so-called superior Western civilization conquered and colonized vast regions of the world owing to their advancement in technology and mission civilisatrice, there have been few histories of the people who encountered the British with more advanced militaries, lavish courts, thriving cities, bustling trade and economies, and complex and developed cultures with extravagance lifestyles. Although James S Mill like historians praised the civilizing mission of the British Empire that came of age when J.S. Mills like historians developed disillusioned historical consciousness, the so-called backward and barbarian autochthonous people were far ahead of the British and other European nascent powers. The story of the British conquest remained a famous subject of romance historians who eulogized the British ability to conquer and subjugate different regions. However, the story of British subjection and their humility and disgrace rarely became a famous subject of study for Western historians.

Although there are many stories of resistance against the British colonial forces around the globe most of them are taken from the point of view of the British perspective heroising the British forces instead of showing the heroic defiance of the conquered. In his exuberantly lively and dazzling account of the world's resistance towards the British Empire, '*The Great Defiance: How the World Took on the British Empire*' David Veevers tells the story of Indigenous people's resistance in his epic book. *The Great Defiance* is the story of the world taking over the British Empire. While castigating the histories written eulogizing the empire where the sun never set, David Veevers sees that 'the defining event of the pre-modern world was not the emergence of an all-encompassing British Empire, but the great defiance of the people who found themselves in its path and their heroic struggle in resisting it—often successfully.'

Irish Rebellions

The long resistance of colonised people against the British started from Irish kingdoms when Anglo-Saxons tried to subdue them and convert them to their religion as the Irish were the first people to come under the sway of British colonialism. The author highlights the magnetic effects of Irish culture and ways of transforming English occupiers that many became fully Irish adopting everything that was part of Irish culture while nominally associating with the British crown. The Irish were skilled in guerilla warfare and the marshy lands and sloppy glens provided perfect places for uprooting the invaders as seen at the Battle of Glenmalur and the Battle of Yellow Ford. Along with one-on-one

pitched battles, the Irish also employed scorched earth policies and time and again saw multiple regional uprisings that kept the English treasury draining.

It was not possible to subdue Irish lords with small expeditionary forces as the author reveals that were so fierce in defending their kingdom that it was easy to win but hard to hold. From the Kildare Rebellion to the Earl of Tyrone's long struggle, the Irish never recognised the full sovereignty of the British colonisers. The result was that the British resorted to the strategy of starvation and destruction of the people, women and children alike by famine that the kingdoms became a 'nightmarish wasteland' where people ate every available item including nettles and docks but still the Irish kept the spirit of defiance alive.

The Indigenous Americans

There is a general perception among naïve readers of the history of civilisations that the American continent had no civilisation except a few barbarians and uncivilised people dwelling there but Veevers' account describes how flourishing cities and communities were masterfully ruling the cities and landscapes. The early Europeans' adventures into the indigenous American port cities were met with stiff resistance from the tribesmen there until Europeans showed clear intent that they were here only to stop over and leave. The kings of Ossomocomuck and Powhatans initially did not allow Europeans to permanently settle there for trade. Most indigenous American societies were well organised and centralised with effective governments such as Ossomocomuck and some were highly decentralized with sustained village communities such as Kalinago which had a formal assembly of villages called *ouicou*.

After decades-long contacts, the British were consigned to small trade but as the British saw that they were hardly using the metal for weapons, they started filling their demand for weapons and gradually established themselves. When once a silver cup was stolen from the British, in vengeance they annihilated and burnt the whole town, and its inhabitants were killed. For initiating permanent settlements, the British successfully carried the holocaust of indigenous people and this ethnic cleansing was not without defiance from the people of that land. In response, the whole petty village kingdoms were cleared one after another and the African Slaves were introduced in their place to work in new settlements which would set the stage for history's most brutal forms of slavery by the people on mission civilisatrice.

The Ottomans and the African Kingdoms

The Ottomans and the pirates working covertly under sultan ministers were in no way resistible to the British expeditions in the Mediterranean. Many of the British ships were often plundered and English were sold to slavery. Until the mid-18th century Ottomans were able to keep the British privateers at bay and James I had to make peace treaties with pirates on the African coasts to keep Mediterranean ventures safe for the Englishmen. The Ottomans ruled undisputed Mediterranean waters and Red Sea ports where the Britons came too late on the stage. The author tells that to keep the favours of the Ottoman Sultans, the Queen had to establish sycophantic relations with women of the

imperial harem otherwise, the Englishmen could hardly stand the Ottoman navy in the Mediterranean.

The Africans were never behind in controlling Europeans. The kingdom of Dahomey was the wealthiest and most powerful kingdom and like the Mughal empire in India, Dahomey kept the British at the margins for most of the time. Only after the Royal African Company started interfering in the internal affairs and gradually involved in human trafficking beneficial both to the African kings and the British, that they later gained a strong footing. Despite the gradual occupation of most of Africa, many kingdoms such as Dahomey had established strong centralised states which kept defying the British until the late eighteenth century.

The Mighty Mughals' Subjection of the EIC

As per common belief that European rise through the pre-modern centuries was due to their advancement, these were the years when the Europeans were disgraced by the advanced cultures and economies around the world and saw great resistance. The fiercest and subjecting resistance came from the Indian subcontinent. When the first British voyage arrived in the great Mughals' India in 1608, it took almost a decade to take a trading license because India was far ahead in production and export which represented a quarter of the world GDP at that time, and rarely cared about obtaining petty British goods and 'the European monarchs seemed virtually destitute' in comparison to Mughals, as Veevers puts it. The artists in India marvelled at anyone in the world, the industrial landscape of Gujrat provided clothes, luxury, and artefacts, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

As William Dalrymple notes in *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of East India Company*, it was not the British government but a private corporation that started the colonization of India, although sanctioned by the British Crown. The rise of the East India Company was not sudden, instead, the company had to acquiesce to Mughal rules of trade and it had to conform to Mughal demands to keep a friendly status in the empire. Such was the power of the Mughals that company officials had to prostrate before the emperor for trespassing limits. Betwixt the conflict of mighty Mughals and the clever and swift Sivaji, the famous Maratha leader, the ultimate losers were Englishmen who had to lose man and money to remain unhurt during the hostilities. Whenever EIC governors tried to confront the Mughals and Marathas, they had to bear severe repercussions.

One of the interesting questions David Veevers addresses is why the Mughals did not expel EIC even if it could; the reason was that the state had to fund its expenses by taxing private corporations as modern states do and fill the coffers of empire. It was not the ability of the company that led to its rapid rise in the subcontinent instead the internal rivalries and treacheries of individuals with a vested interest in upper echelons of governments led to the demise of Indian sultans, nabobs, and emperors as seen during the Battle of Plessey in 1757 and Anglo-Mysore wars. The defiance of the great Mughals and swift and warrior Marathas kept the British at bay for more than a century from the affairs of subcontinental affairs.

The people of the early modern world showed great defiance and resilience due to their powerful cultures and organised governments. In the final words of David Veevers, *'It took the British three centuries to contest this powerful constellation of people and*

states. When they eventually colonized the Indigenous and non-European world, they stripped them of their power through violence, political disenfranchisement, and, ultimately, in what was perhaps their most powerful weapon, the scholarship of history, marginalising and even erasing them and their power from the historical record.' So he says, Britain '*Unmade the World*' and he deserves the full respect of readers from the colonized world to speak of the horrors done to them and bringing their plight of the past and present to the light and his support for the people of Palestine despite facing opposition from around is highly commendable.

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