Oxford academics attack Professor Nigel Biggar over defence of colonialism

Rosemary Bennett, Education Editor

December 21 2017, 12:01am, The Times

Nigel Biggar said that the empire had also provided law and order in countries that many citizens had valued
Dozens of Oxford academics have united to condemn the “simple-minded” defence of British colonialism by a professor at the university.

They said they fear that Nigel Biggar's views suggest a complacency, or even a celebration, towards Britain's imperial past at Oxford.

Professor Biggar wrote in The Times that society should take a more balanced view of the empire rather than simply remembering it with shame.

The regius professor of moral and pastoral theology at Christ Church college acknowledged that there had been atrocities under colonial rule. He said, however, that the empire had also provided law and order in countries that many citizens had valued.

In an open letter, the 58 academics said arguing that the benefits of colonialism balanced out the atrocities was not “serious history”. The abolition of the slave trade, for example, cannot be set against the Amritsar massacre, when troops of the British Indian Army fired machineguns into an unarmed crowd.

“Abolition does not somehow erase the British Empire's own practice of slavery and the benefits it continued to reap from the slave trade long after it ended —
‘brought order’ without examining what that actually meant for those subject to it.”

They said that Professor Biggar was wrong to start his defence by setting up the premise that all other historians say colonialism was “wicked” when most have far more nuanced positions.

The letter was organised by James McDougall, a tutor at Trinity College and Labour Party member. Other organisers include Hussein Omar, a junior research fellow at Pembroke College and specialist in British-occupied Egypt and Sudan, and Erin O’Halloran, a postgraduate at St Antony’s College.

Professor Biggar said last night that none of the academics had raised their concerns in person. His five-year interdisciplinary project, Ethics and Empire, would continue and its seminars would be by invitation only. “I’m delighted to learn that 60 Oxford historians don’t regard empire as always and everywhere wicked. Unfortunately . . . many millions of other people do. I’m also pleased that the historians agree that the moral evaluation of empire can’t be done by crude utilitarian ‘balancing’.
way of evaluating them morally.”

**PLAQUE IN MEMORY OF SLAVES**

An Oxford college is to put up a plaque in memory of slaves who worked for one of its benefactors (*Rosemary Bennett writes*).

All Souls College will place the plaque outside a library paid for by Christopher Codrington. He once owned sugar plantations in Barbados where more than 300 slaves worked and left £10,000 to All Souls when he died in 1710.

All Souls, one of the wealthiest Oxford colleges, which is for post-graduates only, said that it was to remind people where Codrington’s wealth came from.

The college is not alone in confronting Britain’s colonial past.

Oriel College has come under pressure to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes, its British imperialist and benefactor. In the end, though, the statue of Rhodes stayed.

All Souls said that the college remained grateful to Codrington for his donation but the warden and fellows concluded it should provide a public statement about the origins of his wealth.
Oxford academics attack Professor Nigel Biggar over defence of colonialism | The Times & The Sunday Times

NIGEL BIGGAR
Don’t feel guilty about our colonial history

Nigel Biggar
‘For the last 100 years, western colonialism has had a bad name. It is high time to question this orthodoxy.’ So opens “The Case for Colonialism”...

November 30 2017

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December 16 2017

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
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Sir, Nigel Biggar (Comment, Sep 4) is both right and wrong in holding that Sir Vince Cable’s view that imperial nostalgia among the elderly was...

September 8 2017

https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oxford-academics-attack-professor-nigel-biggar-over-defence-of-colonialism-ht6h0zxcv
enslaved by us in the process of incorporating them into our empire all those centuries ago! Indeed, I now concede that our empire was wholly and irremediably evil and that any contradiction of this undeniable fact in whatsoever publication, peer-reviewed or otherwise, should be immediately expunged and met with the strictest censure from the appropriate academic authorities. Furthermore, in response to the question ‘what did the Romans ever do for us?’ I also concede that apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, we Romans contributed few, if any, lasting benefits to the indigenous people of the British Isles - or 'people of woad colour' as we now understand they wish to be addressed. In apologising for the roman empire in which I played such an unforgivably prominent role I also ask that the history books be amended accordingly to note this posthumous admission of collective guilt and that the commissariat convey our deep and sincere regret to our visionary leader, Chairman JereMao Corbyn to whom all party members owe such an unrepayable debt. Yours Sincerely, Julius Caesar. SPQR. (Will that do...? can I go now?)
enslaved by us in the process of incorporating them into our empire all those centuries ago! Indeed, I now concede that our empire was wholly and irremediably evil and that any contradiction of this undeniable fact in whatsoever publication, peer-reviewed or otherwise, should be immediately expunged and met with the strictest censure from the appropriate academic authorities. Furthermore, in response to the question 'what did the Romans ever do for us?' I also concede that apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, we Romans contributed few, if any, lasting benefits to the indigenous people of the British Isles - or 'people of woad colour' as we now understand they wish to be addressed. In apologising for the roman empire in which I played such an unforgivably prominent role I also ask that the history books be amended accordingly to note this posthumous admission of collective guilt and that the commissariat convey our deep and sincere regret to our visionary leader, Chairman JereMao Corbyn to whom all party members owe such an unrepayable debt. Yours Sincerely, Julius Caesar. SPQR. (Will that do...? can I go now?)

Robert Holmes  3 days ago

@james murphy 58 of 1791 academics who might have a post colonialist grudge but like working here and taking the cash or are they missionaries

Bajan Scottish Chips  3 days ago

Re: All Soul's and Codrington - it may be instructive to compare the hand-wringing currently taking place in Oxford with attitudes towards Codrington in Barbados itself.

In the latter case, I am not aware of any great move to rename those landmarks and
side note, one of my own ancestors became a priest thanks to training at Codringtons, before
going on to becoming a barrister at Middle Temple - both fairly unusual achievements for a
'person of colour' in the late 19th century).

Reading the 'Historic Overview' on Codrington College's own website, while it no doubt
doesn't tell the full tale of its benefactor it also doesn't gloss over the harsher aspects of
history for the slaves on Codrington's plantations. See -
http://www.codrington.org/site/index.php/historical-overview. This ties in with the overall
atmosphere in Barbados today, where slavery and its aftermath is an accepted - and obvious -
part of the island's history without any OTT breast-beating. Or at least, not in the circles I
grew up in where we straddle both sides of the 'black'/white' fence - anyone with a different
experience is welcome to chip in.

Mrs Chips

K Pitman 3 days ago
If he had any moral courage James McDougall would consider his position and pursue a
career more suited to his abilities or lack of them.

Graeme Harrison 1 day ago
Is Corbynite goon a career?

Robert Holmes 3 days ago
objectivity home and train the natives

Bernadette Bowles 3 days ago
Obviously you can't say that the Amritsar massacre was unimportant, because it was balanced out by the abolition of slavery - that would be simplistic, and Professor Biggar didn't say it. But the view of the British Empire must encompass both - and also the fact that the action was condemned by the House of Commons, the commander responsible, Colonel Dyer, forced to retire, and the army was given a new policy of minimum force and retrained in non-violent methods of crowd control. Unlike some other empires, we tended to try to learn from our mistakes.

To concentrate only on the worst actions and ignore the very real benefits of the Empire for many of its peoples much of the time is to give a deliberately false picture; as it is to judge the actions of the past by the ideas of the present.

Robert Holmes 3 days ago
probably the only people now who would welcome colonialism are .eg Ndebele and Biarfrans etc

Harmonica 3 days ago
Maybe these 'Academics ' should get together with the National Archives,as they both seem to have a problem with the role played by the British in the abolition of the Slave Trade.
probably a foreign language to those who oppose you, which is why they are so upset.

Dorothy Dachshund 3 days ago

Of course they did. Most of them have a soft spot for Karl Marx and Joseph Stalin. How can a professor at Oxford stand up in front of a class of international students and tell them things they haven't paid to agree with when bashing Great Britain is far more PC. It takes a brave man or woman to go off message in education in 2017.

Nigel Brown 3 days ago

My respect for the academics in Oxford has taken a nosedive, but it does bring it into line with my current respect for most other UK institutions, I'm sad to say.

Robert Holmes 3 days ago

@Nigel Brown 3% of the academics. Number of colonials not known

Robert Holmes 3 days ago

@Nigel Brown 58 out of 1790 possibly with a spear to grind

Noel Bell 3 days ago
Snowflakes?

Steven Morris 3 days ago
@Gladius. I don’t know what the density of left-wing academics at Oxford is, but clearly they're very dense.

Gladius 3 days ago
I wonder what is the density of left-wing academics in Oxford?

Scorpio 3 days ago
@Gladius 58 too many it seems, at least!

Liberty 3 days ago
It is a distortion to focus too much on slavery, however cruel and unjust. It was the way of the world at the time almost everywhere and certainly was not a particularly British thing. The Brits could not have done it without the aid of African kings, etc that captured and sold them on. At least, the Brits put a stop to it.
More importantly, all the greatest achievements of the modern world can be attributed to free commerce and industrialism developed in the UK and spread by the Empire that created the wealth that enabled the development of science, technology, law and order; something many of our former colonies remembers with fondness.
Bernadette Bowles 3 days ago

@Liberty Slavery was pretty much universal for millennia. Even the transAtlantic slave trade was not invented by the British - we were one of the last European nations to get involved. The only thing unique about Britain and the slave trade is that we were the first nation to both stop it ourselves, and use the power of our Empire and our Navy to force other nations to stop it as well. Had we not done so, it's quite likely that slavery would be common to this day, and these academics would not even think of it as wrong, any more than their forebears did.

Treading Water 3 days ago

The 58 academics are clowns of course.

The British empire had many faults but it was far better than the systems it replaced for the most part, for those under its control.

As for slavery, it has been going on for thousands of years before the Europeans got to Africa.

Robert Holmes 3 days ago

@Treading Water and those systems have been replaced by something better by R Mugabe of course

Bernadette Bowles 3 days ago

https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oxford-academics-attack-professor-nigel-biggar-over-defence-of-colonialism-lt6b0zxev
improvements brought in. These "academics" are complaining that people who lived hundreds of years ago did not have the same ethics as those in the 21st century Western world.

Steven Morris 3 days ago
@ Bernadette Bowles. Your last point is excellent. When one looks at historical events of the past through a 2017 lens, one is not studying or analyzing history; rather one is engaging in a study of the past through a skewed lens. This is how real historical study is abused and manipulated to conform to current agendas. The resulting analysis certainly isn’t “history.”

Righttorant 3 days ago
"In open letter, 58 academics...." is a guaranteed precursor to some ill-informed nonsense. It reminds me of the "364 world-renowned economists" and their open letter in the Guardian in 1981 decrying Geoffrey Howe's brilliant budget, which immediately preceded our longest-ever period of economic growth.

Moses Asher 3 days ago
One thing those pathetic academics fail to appreciate is that our colonial past has led, directly, to the wonderful quality of life we enjoy in th UK compared to the rest of the world. The privileges they enjoy today, in the finest educational establishment in the country - fabulously wealthy, cosy and protected - are all a result of our historic imperial advancement. Nothing but hypocrites, and wrong too.
Mr Peter Cuthbertson 3 days ago
Well said, Professor Biggar! Balance has been attained by your views. Would that the academics who have lined up to criticise you showed balance too.

Rafaista 3 days ago
The peoples we conquered asked us to come in, take their lands, their resources, and give them our religion, law and order. They had no political societies before. They sat around fires in the forest and ate each other. They had no law, no order, no music, no art. The Benin bronzes were asiatic in origin. Africans could never have achieved such sophistication. In some places we put together 100 different tribes, each with their own language, and in the space of 100 years asked to become a nation. What we could not do in 8 centuries in Ireland without repression, and importing a frontier elite, we thought we could do for a whole continent in less than a 100. There were more primary schools in London than there were in all of Nigeria and Ghana on independence. Still we didn't do a bad job. These places had to be self sufficient. The British tax payer had outside toilets. We couldn't go developing Bathurst before Batley. We weren't the Germans, or Belgians or French who till today view African nations as their vassals. We got it wrong from the standards of today. Morals change. Our hearts weren't bad in the past. Our values were different. Values progress. There's yer course Prof. 80 seminars? FFS

Gladius 3 days ago
How very biased.

Dr Half-track 3 days ago
"Dozens of Oxford academics" seem to consist largely of activist students, junior research fellow freeloaders, purveyors of third-world excuse narratives, and Labour Party activists crippled by 'guilt'.

No, British Imperialism did not introduce the slave trade to Africa, or the opium trade to China. And yes, the British constructed railways, in India. These people should study some history.

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**JournoList** 3 days ago

If only we hadn't repelled the Spanish when they came calling and instead invited them in to enrich our culture. ¿No?

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**JournoList** 3 days ago

And why did the Spanish turn on the bringers of refinement? Was it just to make "El Cid"?

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**Gladius** 3 days ago

One can't help but feel that for some attacking British colonial history is just another means to attack Britain, even though for many it is the country of their birth.

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**J McGill** 3 days ago
Normans but let's not let historic facts get in the way of bashing the horrible English. And don't get me started on the Plantation, the Protestant work ethic and the Industrial revolution. What did they ever do for us? Oh and what about Cromwell, Oliver not Thomas? The Penal Laws, the attempted eradication of Catholicism and the Irish language and the subjugation of the native Irish. Victorian entrepreneurship driving on regardless in the face of hundreds of thousands starving. But then they were doing that in England as well as in Ireland. So as you can see from my tongue in cheek approach to Empire building, historically there were many negatives and many positives in the process. Let's not forget it is history. Let's learn from it and move on as a better nation.

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**Rafaista** 3 days ago

Frecking bravo! All you one eyed simpletons who don't do nuance, please learn by heart the comment above.

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**Slightly Tipsy Max** 3 days ago

*@J McGill* and what do we English get back? Bloody U2...

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**JournoList** 3 days ago

*@Slightly Tipsy Max* @J McGill ....Liverpool.

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**Slightly Tipsy Max** 3 days ago
JournoList 3 days ago
@Slightly Tipsy Max @JournoList @J McGill Talking while eating, eh.

John Adsett 3 days ago
@Slightly Tipsy Max @J McGill and Boyzone!

Danny Streather 3 days ago
@J McGill

Thank you, John Cleese would be proud of you, made me chuckle!

Slightly Tipsy Max 3 days ago
I don't see the point or hand wringing or gloating to be honest. Let's just have the truth in our history books

Ed 3 days ago
Thank God for Professor Biggar - please stay strong and say what you think! The degenerate censoring of dissenting views in academia must be stopped.
Slightly Tipsy Max 3 days ago
@Ed Shouting down the other side is just as hypocritical.

Charles Atkinson 3 days ago
@Slightly Tipsy Max @Ed Snowflake!!

Colin Gordon 3 days ago
What a brilliant and dignified response from Nigel Biggar:

“I’m delighted to learn that 60 Oxford historians don’t regard empire as always and everywhere wicked. Unfortunately . . . many millions of other people do. I’m also pleased that the historians agree that the moral evaluation of empire can’t be done by crude utilitarian ‘balancing’.

“That’s why the Ethics and Empire project will pay careful attention to the historical variety of things that empire can be, and work out a more sophisticated way of evaluating them morally.”

Scorpio 3 days ago
@Colin Gordon

The truth is we actually need more Nigel Bigger's in academia to create a truly "heterogenous educational environment" of all opinions. This point is lost on his critics who seek conformity through intimidation and slander to one faith. We know
Andy Twitchett 3 days ago
Professor Bigun is quite correct, we helped those backward types (i.e. the rest of the world) and civilized them. We gave them cucumber sandwiches, kippers and lollipop men. We introduced new products to them, opium to the Chinese and whiskey to everyone. They could be sober now if it wasn't for us. Yet do they show us gratitude and respect? We might as well have not bothered. I rest my case.

Ed 3 days ago
@Andy Twitchett How very funny.

Charles Atkinson 3 days ago
@Andy Twitchett You sound like one of those who would not bother doing anything other than sneering from the sidelines.

Andy Twitchett 3 days ago
@Charles Atkinson ouch.

John Adsett 3 days ago
@Andy Twitchett Don't you just love irony?
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https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oxford-academics-attack-professor-nigel-biggar-over-defence-of-colonialism-h76h0zxcv