

End of Empire

Brian Lapping

The British Empire was the largest in the history of the world. Brian Lapping explains how the end of that Empire was charted for television.

To fit the end of the British Empire into a television series is like trying to fit a camel into a brown paper parcel. The shape isn't convenient for the package.

Books on the Empire have a disconcerting habit: they dart about. Here we are in Singapore to learn about the surrender in 1942, then over to India for its most significant political consequences, then to the Middle East where the Empire is faring better, then south into Africa, whose men are by now fighting in Burma. It is not always easy to follow, even on the page, especially when the Government in London changes in the midst of several complicated developments in the colonies. A television series, competing always against a washing machine flood, a crying baby or an unexpected phone call, would be ill-advised to adopt the same method.

Five years ago Granada Television decided to make a series to be called End of Empire. The company's motive was simple: the British empire was the largest in the history of the world and men who played key roles in its closing years were still alive in such places as Aldeburgh, Salisbury and Bath. To capture their memories on film before it was too late was an urgent task. Naturally, in all cases, the memories of Britons had to be matched against those of the nationalist leaders with whom they dealt, so our production teams travelled to Australia, Malaysia, Japan, the United States, and to many parts of Africa and the Middle East. But how to select?

Between 1947 and 1980, forty-nine British territories became independent. To attempt to deal with them all would create clutter. It would also be repetitive. The Colonial Office press office in the early sixties, when I was regularly reporting the advance to independence for the Guardian, used to try to make it all seem orderly: first native appointed to legislative council; first native on executive council; first elections; constitutional conference and they're off. Had so peaceful a course been followed in the majority of the forty-nine territories, our project would have had to be abandoned. Not long ago a Granada series was described by a critic as able to stun a sheep at fifty paces. We did not want to earn the same accolade. Fortunately for our purpose, the stories available to us included misunderstanding, murder, massacre and every sort of political chicanery. We might make them monotonous, but the raw material could not be blamed. So our first and most important task was to choose the right cases fairly to convey the full panorama of the end of the British Empire, while making sure that each story was different and exciting. We decided that of the forty-nine we would choose a round dozen and give enough time to each to allow us to explore it in some depth. Each programme would deal with one territory only and would end with the British flag coming down.

Several programme subjects selected themselves. India was plainly the largest and most important possession any empire has ever held. The issue was not whether to include it but how to represent its weight. Our solution was to devote one programme to every other territory, but three to India. The events – from the Viceroy's declaration of war on Germany in 1939 without consulting a single Indian to Mountbatten's 'triumph' in 1947 accompanied by possibly a million murdered in the Punjab – did not lack incident.

Kenya was another case that chose itself. The Mau Mau revolt there caused the Colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttelton, to write that as he sat in his office in London, 'I would suddenly see a shadow fall across the page – the homed shadow of the Devil'. Events that gave a senior Minister and many officials so improbable a vision could not be left out.

Cyprus drove Harold Macmillan to write that it was 'one of the most baffling problems I can ever remember'. If Supermac was stumped, the tale must be told. Moreover, the central figures in these stories fascinated the world. Was Jomo Kenyatta a great conciliator and pacifier or the 'leader unto darkness and death' (as a British Governor called him in 1960, only months before he became Prime Minister)? Was Archbishop Makarios – a man of God – the instigator and mastermind behind Grivas and his EOKA killer gangs? (We were able to answer this question so definitively, in the filmed words of heroes of the Greek Cypriots' struggle, that it will almost certainly be impossible for our programme to be publicly shown by Cyprus Television.)

Another must was Egypt. Although formally part of the Empire only between 1914 and 1922, Egypt was at the heart of the imperial trading and defence system, and the Suez humiliation of 1956 caused both the British and French empires in Africa, which until then seemed to have some decades to run, suddenly to collapse. While we did not want to re-tell the tale of the collusion that led Eden to Suez, if we omitted Nasser we would render the End of Empire story incomplete. Luckily we were able to interview participants in the events which led to Britain's withdrawal from its vast base on the Suez canal and which, we think, help the drama of 1956 to make sense.

The one remaining programme theme that chose itself was Rhodesia. We judged that the fifteen-year UDI episode was the last time the British Empire would occupy the centre of world attention for a sustained period and must therefore be the last programme. This view was not shaken when, in the midst of our production process, the Falklands war broke out. By our criteria it was a flash-in-the-pan, useful to illustrate the lingering imperial spirit, but not meriting a programme in our series. Likewise the deal between Mrs Thatcher and Mr Deng Xiou-ping on Hong Kong disturbed the calm tenor of our work only briefly. Both the Falklands and Hong Kong are still British colonies, along with Gibraltar, the British Virgin Islands and a dozen other tiny territories. Since we had decided that the British Empire effectively ended between 1947 (India) and 1980 (Rhodesia), the small residues could be ignored: they were not an Empire but the crumbs left after the imperial banquet was over.

Would the irresistible programmes – three on India, one each on Kenya, Cyprus, Egypt and Rhodesia – make for a balanced series, fairly representing the End of Empire as a whole? Certainly not. Above all, three programmes dealing with the events leading to the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 would be insufficient to convey the central fact that the British Empire was primarily oriental. We therefore had to add at least one programme from among Burma, Ceylon, Malaya, Singapore and the Chinese consular service. The amazing drama of half Burma's cabinet being assassinated a few months before independence was hard to resist. Equally exciting was the story of those who sided with the Japanese against Britain in the Second World War, including not only the leading Burmese nationalists but part of the Indian nationalist movement under Subhas Chandra Bose. Burma and Bose were for a long time on the list of likely programmes, but we eventually concluded that those who sided with the Japanese were a cul-de-sac off the main highway of End of Empire. (We were able to pass our material to colleagues in Granada who produced a documentary on Bose, 'The War of the Springing Tiger', to accompany transmission of the adaptation of Paul Scott's novels, 'The Jewel in the Crown'.)

The case for including Ceylon in the series was that it was the model transfer of power: long planned, peacefully executed, just how the Colonial Office would have liked them all to go. However, as we began work on India the case strengthened for dropping Ceylon, Burma and the Chinese consular service. Few of the principal decision-makers of the years before 1947 survived to tell their stories, and film of those years was scarce, even for India. No decision is easier than one imposed by scarcity of material. Malaya, compared to the other far eastern territories, had several advantages. The 'emergency' which brought independence lasted from 1948 to 1960, later and therefore offering us a better choice of both surviving participants and film. Malaya provided the one major confrontation with Communism in the declining years of the British Empire, and was therefore a convenient way of introducing the dog that did not bark in the night. Malayan tin and rubber were the Empire's biggest dollar earner. And Malaya provided one of the later imperial wars

of which plainly none should be left out. Its drawback was that the Malays never had a major national movement demanding that the British must go. Consequently Malaya's route to independence was not easy to describe. If we could find a way of weaving in the separate but related story of the Singapore naval base, Malaya seemed the best choice in the Far East for us to tackle: certainly it contrasted with all other stories in the series. In the end we devoted much of programme one to Singapore and programme five to Malaya, thus giving India and the Far East the biggest block of our time.

The next largest chunk had to go to the Middle East. Here was the oil over which, in the concluding years of the Empire, the British were determined to retain control; here the strategic crossroads of the world, as seen from Europe; here Britain's worst series of errors. With Cyprus and Egypt included from the initial list of musts, which other middle-eastern cases should we describe?

Palestine had been the subject of an excellent, award-winning series made by Richard Broad for Thames Television in 1978. The story of Israel and the Palestinians was on television continually. Why rake over old coals? The answer was that no programme had been devoted to examining Palestine from the point of view of the British Empire and that recent research had fundamentally changed scholarly perspectives on the subject. Equally important, a major sub-plot through the series must be the displacement of Pax Britannica by Pax Americana and Palestine provided the clearest example (although, in this case, it was *Bellum Britannicum* turned *Bellum Americanum*.) Above all, Palestine had to be included because of the wounding humiliation it brought the Empire.

For the same reason we decided to include Aden, the only British imperial departure that was more chaotic, rushed and impotent even than that from Palestine. An attraction of Aden was that it enabled us to show something of the anti-British feeling inspired by Gamal Abdul Nasser after 1956. A bigger attraction was that the Marxist and pro-Soviet regime in Aden (now called the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) habitually refuses to admit western journalists. If we could get in there, we were certain to discover something new.

We decided to make one programme that is located mid-way between the Middle East and India. It is about Iran. The Empire, strictly defined, included only those territories directly ruled by a British Governor, wearing the Queen's uniform and enforcing her laws. Yet to be constrained by this definition would mean leaving out a major part of Britain's imperial role. Iran was, we considered, the best example of the many princely states under British sway. It contained, in the Anglo-Iranian oil company, the largest single British overseas investment; twice in the twentieth century the man who was to become its Shah was selected by the British; and the nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company by Dr Mussadiq in 1951 produced an episode of major importance in the End of Empire story. Further, recent publications, particularly the memoirs of C.M. Woodhouse, provided the leads which would enable us to go further than any previous historians or journalists in describing British involvement in the coup that overthrew Mussadiq. Including Iran, however, meant making no programme on Britain's extraordinary relationship with the Hashemite monarchies in Iraq and Jordan. This was a finely balanced choice. We decided on Iran because the Mussadiq episode, 1951-53, provided a coherent drama of British imperial activity that, in the closing years of the Empire, the Hashemites could not match.

The next area for attention was Africa. Having decided to make a programme each on Kenya and Rhodesia, which others of Britain's sixteen colonies in Africa should we include? The first question was how to tackle South Africa. Here was the main area of British investment in the continent until the 1960s, one of the most contentious countries in the world, virtually expelled from the Commonwealth in 1961 and a predator after Britain's 'High Commission Territories' of Bechuanaland (now Botswana), Basutoland (now Lesotho) and Swaziland: surely a suitable case for inclusion in the series? These reasons notwithstanding, we decided to leave South Africa out. During the End of Empire period 1947-80 – South Africa was sovereign; the British flag had come down many decades earlier.

For some time the Gold Coast and Uganda were competing for a place. When we were planning the

series, Uganda was ruled by General Amin and was the most prominent ex-British colony in the news each day. The events of the years leading to independence in Uganda were in many ways remarkably similar to those in the Gold Coast. In each an able, young leader – Milton Obote and Kwame Nkrumah – led a radical, nationalist party; a powerful traditional state within the colony – respectively Buganda and Ashanti – resisted the plans for independence under the rule of the modernisers; the governors – Sir Andrew Cohen and Sir Charles Arden-Clarke – decisively took the side of the young nationalists and dragged Britain's Conservative Colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttelton, into supporting them against the traditional rulers. Given such similarities, we plainly could not include both. Uganda had the advantage that one of the principal participants, Milton Obote, was still alive. However, Obote was a follower of Nkrumah, whose role as the beacon of African nationalism made him a necessary figure in the series, alongside Nehru, Kenyatta, Nasser and Makarios. The Gold Coast was the turning point for the British Empire in Africa and had to be included. The discovery that Nkrumah's two closest colleagues in the years leading to independence, Komla Gbedema and Kojo Botsio, were both still alive and in good form justified the decision.

Making a programme on the Gold Coast soon led to our deciding we must leave out the biggest and most populous country in black Africa, Nigeria – a particularly painful decision to make after establishing contact with Nnamdi Azikiwe, the country's first President, and conducting a research interview with his boisterous and charming rival, Chief Awolowo. However, Nigeria undoubtedly tagged along behind the Gold Coast. It would not by itself make an exciting programme.

The omission of Tanganyika was an easier decision, but also involved some heart-searching. The last Governor, Sir Richard Tumbull, and the principal nationalist leader, Julius Nyerere, were both alive and Nyerere has extraordinary ability to move British audiences. We received much help in planning the series from officers and staff of the Royal Commonwealth Society, who told us that in the last thirty years or so of public meetings there, only one speaker had ever filled the main lecture hall to overflowing and then won a standing ovation: Julius Nyerere. And he had done it twice. Such magnetic appeal was hard to resist, but if East Africa was represented by a programme on Kenya and West Africa by one on the Gold Coast, no room remained for the comparatively peaceful progress to independence of Tanganyika.

By now our planned dozen had risen to fourteen. The final topic was the hardest to decide and aroused most argument with my colleagues. In my original proposal I included a programme on the West Indies, because I thought it right to represent all major regions, because this had been one of the most important areas in the history of the Empire and because it seemed a proper courtesy to the substantial population in Britain of West Indian origin. However, I failed to find a story that I considered would make a good television programme in the progress of the West Indies to independence. On the contrary, the processes that led to the setting up of the West Indies Federation and the squabbling that led to its disintegration seemed to me petty – the kind of thing local newspapers have to print about councillors, but national and international papers ignore. For a time I was persuaded that one strong story in the West Indies did merit inclusion, Britain's removal from office in 1953 of the elected, Marxist Premier of British Guiana, Cheddi Jagan, and his eventual replacement by Forbes Burnham, a man more acceptable to both British business and the United States.

However, by the stage at which this issue was being considered, we had persuaded Channel Four to take fourteen one-hour programmes and they did not feel able to increase the number. If we wanted to include British Guiana, we would have to drop one of the others. The candidate for dropping was the fourth African programme on which I had set my heart the Central African Federation. To leave out the West Indies would undoubtedly be odd and invite criticism, but could be justified by the criteria we had established. To leave out the Central African Federation would, I considered, mean missing one of the most extraordinary and important stories of the End of Empire.

The big question in the West Indies and British Guiana was whether the British would do their best,

in granting independence, to install regimes friendly to Britain's great ally in the area, the United States. In Central Africa, on the other hand, wedged between apartheid to the south and burgeoning black nationalism to the north, Britain tried to construct a new state based on racial partnership. It did not work, largely because white settler leaders like Sir Roy Welensky were not committed to racial partnership in the sense that the Africans demanded and the British Colonial Office felt bound to support. The tension that developed between the white settler government of the Federation and the Conservative government in London provided the single most sustained clash of principle and the longest-running political battle in Westminster of the entire End of Empire story. Sir Roy Welensky won a substantial part of the Conservative party in the House of Commons to his side not only against their own Colonial Secretary, Iain Macleod, but also against their own leader and Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. The West Indies were finally left out because they did not throw up a tale as powerful as the fourteen that the series includes.

Were we right to leave out the Pacific colonies? Were we right to leave out Mauritius, with its fascinating Prime Minister, Sir Seewosagur Ramgoolam, and its dependency, Aldabra, where the cormorant and the flightless rail were sacrificed to British and American defence interests? Were we right to leave out the Sudan which, owing to the Oxbridge sports bias in British recruitment policy, became known as the land where blues ruled blacks? Were we right to leave out Britain's oldest colony, the Gambia? Were we right to leave out Zanzibar, where the Sultan to whom Britain transferred sovereignty was promptly removed by a revolution, to retire with his entourage to Southsea, conveniently at hand for us to interview? Each of these questions was considered at some length and several spin-off programmes have been transmitted while we have been working on the series.

The one matter of which we are certain is that we were right to leave out the events that led to the independence of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Ireland. They all happened too long ago for us to be able to interview any of the principals. And it is the original material we have gathered in interviews with the principals which provides the primary justification for our five years' work.