Chapter 10: The Tale of the Imperial Balance Sheet

In January 2005, Gordon Brown, then chancellor of the exchequer and Tony Blair’s heir apparent, visited Tanzania on an African trip which ended in South Africa. The topic of British imperialism in Africa had been in the news for about a fortnight since Thabo Mbeki, the South African president, had dedicated a speech in Khartoum to the atrocities of British colonialism.¹ The visit to Tanzania would have had colonial undertones even without Mbeki’s speech, as the visit’s programme focused mainly on ‘Commonwealth sites’. On the morning of 15 January, Brown visited a cemetery of some 300 colonial soldiers and spoke to the Daily Mail, which quickly published an article titled ‘It’s time to celebrate the empire, says Brown’:

> Britain must stop apologising for its colonial past and recognise that it has produced some of the greatest ideas in history, Gordon Brown has declared. The Chancellor called for the ‘great British values’—freedom, tolerance, civic duty—to be admired as some of our most successful exports.²

Brown’s remark was hardly reported at the time and thus did not trigger any great debate. However, it fell into a logic of the empire’s

¹ See the Guardian, 5 January 2005.
² Daily Mail, 15 January 2005.
‘balance sheet’, which by that time had already begun characterising the conversation about empire. In the style of history A-Level essays, politicians, journalists and some historians who addressed empire did so through a supposed examination of the empire’s ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides, or Britons’ ‘pride’ or ‘shame’. Indeed, in a political climate that was not receptive to conversations about colonial history, every actor who addressed empire perceived themselves as ‘breaking a taboo’, be it a belief that a left-wing ‘stifling of free speech’ had made it impossible to talk about the positive sides of empire or that a conservative conspiracy of silence had kept its history of violence hidden away from the public eye.

The ‘balance sheet’ approach has received a growing scholarly attention lately, but its first public iterations can be traced back to a 1972 debate in the House of Lords over the successful BBC 13-episode production The British Empire: Echoes of Britannia’s Rule that attracted 9 million viewers a week.3 The series was not based on historical scholarship, but on James (later Jan) Morris’ trilogy Pax Britannica, and presented the empire—despite bursts of violence—as a linear, Whiggish historical progression towards liberty. Simultaneously, it also raised the kind of criticism that made BBC producers think twice before contemplating another project that engaged with the history of the British empire. Complaints ranged from audiences who sent dozens of letters of complaint that deplored how the production ‘knocked’ the empire,4 to members of the House of Lords, led by Lord Ferrier, who had successfully exerted pressure on the BBC to ‘cut down the violence’ and modify the films.5 A group of speakers even took to the stage of the House of Lords to voice their discontent with the BBC production as ‘slander’. For the speakers, productions about the imperial past needed to convey that there was ‘something mystical and perhaps even something spiritual’ about the empire.6 They were afraid that

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3 The project, initiated by the producer Max Morgan-Witts and executed in collaboration with the American Time-Life, comprised 13 episodes about the story of the empire, and it was accompanied by a series of publications edited by Time-Life. Viewing numbers quoted in Hansard, 6 July 1972.
4 See, for example, Bernard Fergusson’s complaint about the programme on New Zealand: ‘I cannot conceive what the purpose behind this series can be, unless it is to make us ashamed, and our children, of what is not an inglorious past. It is the perquisite of the propagandist, not of the historian, to select and perpetuate only the shadiest pages of the record’, the Times, 30 March 1972.
5 See Hansard, 6 July 1972.
6 Lord Gridley, Hansard, 6 July 1972.
the new generation were already seeing the empire as ‘defunct, moribund and as something which does not matter’\(^7\) with no personal—or emotional—attachment to it. Showing ‘recognition of the pride in our past’\(^8\) was therefore the only way forward.

In the realm of culture and depictions, it was mainly the world of Anglo-India that provided opportunities to view empire. In the 1970s—and especially the second half of the decade—a growing number of nostalgic, sepia-tinted takes on the world of Anglo-India emerged, where the colonial settings only magnified the pomp and circumstance of a white English aristocracy. M. M. Kaye, born in 1908 into a family marked by involvement with the Raj, authored the most successful literary example of this genre in *The Far Pavilions* (1978). For Kaye, the 1000-page best-selling story of an English officer during the Raj was one in a series of novels with colonial settings,\(^9\) but by far the most successful one. Its success saw it adapted into a miniseries starring Omar Sharif in 1984. Her personal influence on her agent Paul Scott resulted in the publication of the series *The Raj Quartet* (1966–75), which was later adapted as a made-for-TV film *The Jewel in the Crown* (1982). Kaye’s work was informed by a desire to communicate the long-lost world of Anglo-India to a generation in which ‘no one else will ever again live the kind of life that I have lived or see what I saw’.\(^10\) On a less nostalgic note, Richard Attenborough’s production *Gandhi* attracted much furore after the film had become an international success. Resenting the film’s depiction of British violence, the historian John Grigg criticised the film for omitting Gandhi’s debt to British traditions and portraying British authorities as anything other than ‘for the most part, intelligent and sensitive men’.\(^11\)

Even as representations of empire became extremely scarce after the nostalgic moment of the 1980s, Astrid Rasch argues that the balance-sheet argument made later return thanks to the generation that the Lords feared would lose its connection to empire. In the productions *Indian Summers* (2015) and *Victoria and Abdul* (2017), Rasch identifies a desire to create ‘feel good’ images of empire through narratives that use a

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\(^7\) Lord Auckland, ibid.
\(^8\) Lord Barnby, ibid.
\(^9\) Two of Kaye’s more forgotten titles are *Death in Kenya* and *Death in Zanzibar*, both of which were written in the late 1950s.
\(^10\) Quoted from obituary of Kaye, *Daily Telegraph*, 31 January 2004.
\(^11\) *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 April 1983.
The balance-sheet approach to acknowledge some imperial wrongdoing, but depoliticise these and highlight the inherent anti-racist nature of the British protagonists. In so doing, Rasch uses the balance-sheet approach, which by that period had become explicitly politicised, to highlight implicit cultural representations. Moving away from cultural representations, however, this chapter examines the politicisation of the balance-sheet approach from the mid-2000s to the end of the 2010s, by which time it had come to dominate the framing of imperial history in public debates.

The political revival of the balance-sheet approach in the 2000s, and particularly through the hyper-visibility of the historian Niall Ferguson, emerged as a right-wing attempt to break the silence on empire. Ferguson, but later also other conservative actors, wanted to rehabilitate empire against what they perceived as a left-wing conspiracy to present empire is ‘bad’. In so doing, they not only claimed the mantel of resistance, otherwise used by anti-racist activists, as they insisted that they were the underdogs fighting against an established silence. They also embedded popular myths about Britain—as the first country to abolish slavery and the only country to have supposedly decolonised peacefully—into the demand to highlight empire’s positive sides. As such, they forced academics and left-wing activists, whether during the Mau Mau debate and its apology in 2013, the public clash over Nigel Biggar’s Oxford project in 2018 or the subsequent toppling of statues in 2020, into a straitjacket of a balance-sheet debate: was empire ‘good’ or ‘bad’? When academics wished to address imperial history in public, they did not have any alternative memory vocabulary, like France’s devoir de mémoire, to argue for any other purpose of addressing history in public. With no political justification for memory, debates did not move beyond the logic of ‘pride’ and ‘shame’.

The Rise of Niall Ferguson

The man most often identified with an explicit project of the rehabilitation of empire is the historian Niall Ferguson. The political climate and support of ‘liberal interventions’ of the Blair years proved propitious for Ferguson, a true proponent of transatlantic interventionism, to make a public case

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12 Rasch, Astrid, ‘Keep the balance’: The Politics of Remembering Empire in Post-Colonial Britain’, in: Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies, Vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 212–30.

13 More on this political climate, see Dubow, Saul, ‘The New Age of Imperialism: British and South African Perspectives’, in: Harris, Mary and Lévai, Csaba (eds.), Europe and its Empires (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2008), pp. 1–16.
for the rehabilitation of empire. A Scottish financial historian trained at Oxford, Ferguson was professor of financial history at New York University at the time of the Iraq invasion and moved to Harvard a year later. Ferguson was a staunch supporter of the neo-conservative Bush administration, or a self-proclaimed ‘fully paid-up member of the neo-imperialist gang’, as he saw the US as the successor of the British Empire, the new benevolent imperial force in the world. He often claimed his goal was to persuade the US to admit that globalisation was but ‘a fancy word for imperial control’ and that the country needed to assume the responsibilities involved in being the world’s imperial superpower.

In Britain, Ferguson perceived himself as a lone fighter for the rehabilitation of the legacy of the British empire against a ‘politically correct establishment’. He sought to break out of British academia, which he considered unable to recognise that the empire had been a force for good. In 2003, he published his first major work *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* with a non-academic publisher and simultaneously worked on a *Channel 4* production that was screened a year later. Both the book and the series analysed the rise and fall of the British empire from a strictly financial perspective. Ferguson admitted that violence had been part of the process of empire, but claimed that acts of violence had been minor in comparison to other empires or less benevolent, indigenous leaders. The reason for the demise of the empire according to Ferguson was the fight against Nazism, which bankrupted Britain for the sake of advancing liberty and defending the world from totalitarianism. As Ferguson linked empire to the Second World War and the fight against Nazism, he did not only rely on the old Whig argument of seeing British imperialism as a tool to enhance world freedom, but harnessed Nazi history in order to articulate a normative judgement.

Ferguson’s performance on *Channel 4* became an instant success. One of the most immediate reasons for the show’s popularity was Ferguson’s appearance and style. Even his biggest critics, of whom there were many, conceded he was a captivating presenter and engaging writer. Ferguson was both serious and chatty, a polished representative of neo-conservative business appeal. Hugh Thomas, in a book review for the *Evening Standard* concluded that Ferguson was ‘so full of energy, imagination and curiosity

14 *New York Times*, 27 April 2003.
15 The *Guardian*, 20 October 2001.
that we can forgive him […] minor lapses’,\textsuperscript{16} while the \textit{Guardian}’s Rachel Redford noted that his ‘infectious energy’ and ‘vigorous prose’ earned him the laurels of Top Media History Man’.\textsuperscript{17} Tellingly, \textit{Empire} turned Ferguson into Britain’s most successful public historian on a platform that had otherwise been considered too controversial to be embraced.

\textit{Empire} was the newest in a series of history productions that gave a platform to would-be controversialists and proved \textit{Channel 4}’s Jeremy Isaacs\textsuperscript{18} right for commissioning the first large-scale production about empire since the 1970s. Ferguson’s rise confirmed that his argument did not seem so fraught for many Britons. Unsurprisingly, Ferguson’s argument—and person—received warm support from platforms such as the \textit{Telegraph} or the \textit{Daily Mail}. The Conservative politician Michael Gove, who often repeated his admiration for ‘Fergie’, reached for the trope of the ‘old boys club’ as he noted that ‘we history boys know that there is “only one Niall Ferguson” […] He is effectively a lone voice in academic circles because he bothers to do with his work what Rooney and Gerrard do on the pitch—he takes pride in his country’.\textsuperscript{19} Max Hastings continued along the same lines in the \textit{Telegraph} as he claimed that ‘Ferguson’s book does not stint in recording imperial lapses and causes for shame, but it finally offers rich sources of pride’.\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{Guardian}’s Hywell Williams, at the same time, saw Ferguson’s success as the result of the articulation of a ‘very Tory […] feel-good history’.\textsuperscript{21}

Ferguson presented himself as a postmodern corrective to a public debate otherwise too skewed to the left, whose goal was to ‘create a balance sheet which showed that some good things emerged alongside the

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Evening Standard}, 20 January 2003.
\textsuperscript{17} The \textit{Guardian}, 16 February 2003.
\textsuperscript{18} Jeremy Isaacs was the \textit{Channel 4} producer who has most defined its programmes, commissioning many controversial, often revisionist documentaries, to challenge the BBC–ITV duopoly. Some examples include the \textit{Secret History} series (1991–2004) or the anti-environmentalist Martin Durkin’s documentaries \textit{Against Nature} (1997) or \textit{Great Global Warming Swindle} (2007). See Lee-Wright, Peter, ‘The Documentary Tradition’, in: Conboy, Martin and Steel, John (eds.), \textit{The Routledge Companion to British Media History} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 429. See also Wilson, Jon, ‘Niall’s Ferguson Imperial Passion’, in: \textit{History Workshop Journal}, vol. 56, no. 1 (Autumn 2003), pp. 175–6.
\textsuperscript{19} Michael Gove’s article titled ‘There’s only one Fergie in the history game’, in: the \textit{Times}, 14 June 2006.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 5 January 2003.
\textsuperscript{21} The \textit{Guardian}, 9 January 2003.
bad’. As there had not been any debate before, especially not one skewed towards the left, Ferguson was peddling a fantasy, but by claiming to only want to triangulate public perceptions, he initiated a sterile and simplistic moral debate about a ‘balance sheet’ of empire for a generation that had never experienced it. Simultaneously, one would have expected more vocal criticism of Ferguson on the academic left. Historians often chose to avoid picking direct fights with him. Ferguson’s propensity to turn criticism into personal fights was probably most visible in his letter of response to Bernard Porter’s remark that Empire was a ‘panegyric to British colonialism’ in a review of another book in the London Review of Books. Curiously, however, Ferguson did not react to the only review of his book by a respectable imperial historian, Linda Colley, in a mainstream media outlet. In a Guardian article, Colley criticised Ferguson’s ‘balance sheet’ strategy as history that did not take people’s lived experiences into account. On Ferguson’s argument that the British Empire brought prosperity in the long term through the establishment of free trade, Colley wrote that

individual human beings do not live by the free market alone and nor do they live in the long run. The immediate impact of British imperial free-trading was often the collapse of local indigenous industries which were in no position to compete, and a consequent destruction of livelihoods and communities.

Moreover, while the ‘usual suspects’ of the left’s commentariat in the form of Seumas Milne and George Monbiot—the latter an old housemate of Ferguson’s from their student days at Oxford—poured intermittent outrage over the attempt to rehabilitate empire on the pages of the Guardian, most of the mainstream left stayed out of any verbal confrontations. In a column which especially angered Ferguson, Milne wrote that ‘in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, what had seemed a wacky rightwing wheeze was taken up in Britain with increasing enthusiasm by conservative popular historians like Niall Ferguson […] as the Sun and Mail cheered

22 The Guardian, 30 May 2006.
23 London Review of Books, vol. 27, no. 10, 19 May 2005.
24 London Review of Books, vol. 27, no. 5, 5 March 2005.
25 The Guardian, 18 January 2003.
26 See, for example, Monbiot, George, ‘An Empire of Denial’, in: the Guardian, 1 June 2004.
them on’. Here, Ferguson answered and reiterated the ‘balance sheet’ approach:

Milne makes the mistake of concluding from a small number of familiar episodes […] that the history of the British empire is nothing more than a history of ‘horrors’. […] What he fails to consider is the entire balance sheet of British rule […] Oh, and spare me the Robert Mugabe line that everything that goes amiss in Africa today is a legacy of colonialism.28

While these minor exchanges happened in the press, however, no other actors of the New Labour left weighed in. While in France, works of such nature—especially with this degree of success—quickly became the subject of political protests by teachers’ unions, academics and activists, in Britain, with a few minor exceptions over the period of two years, political actors mostly disregarded the rise of a narrative that openly sought to rehabilitate colonial history.

**REMEMBERING THE MAU MAU?**

As a public conversation about Britain’s imperial history was limited to minor flares of outrage, a concentrated effort by two historians sought to focus the debate on the dark side of Britain’s colonial history in Kenya. The Mau-Mau emergency had been Britain’s most violent episode of decolonisation. However, in order to initiate a conversation about the meaning of its violence, it first needed to be acknowledged as a relevant topic in contemporary Britain.

From a position of extreme visibility in the British press in the 1950s, the Mau Mau emergency disappeared into oblivion after Kenyan independence in 1963. Writing in 1984, the author M.M. Kaye began the introduction to the revised edition of her romantic thriller *Death in Kenya* (first published in 1958 as *Later than You Think*) with the sentence: ‘Few people nowadays will remember the Mau-Mau terrorist rising in Kenya, and millions more will never even have heard of it. But it was an unpleasant business while it lasted.’29 Kaye thus referred to a silence in popular culture about Kenya following the colony’s independence. This silence applied to

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27 See Seumas Milne’s piece ‘Barbarity is the Inevitable Consequence of Foreign Rule’, in: the *Guardian*, 27 January 2005.
28 The *Guardian*, 12 February 2005.
29 Kaye, MM, *Death in Kenya* (Penguin, 1984), p. 1.
Britain’s bloody departure as well as to the former colony’s special role in the British colonial imagination.

In fact, Kenya had embodied popular perceptions of British colonial Africa more than any other colony. On the one hand, it was the face of pristine Africa, where exotic wildlife roamed through the lush, temperate hills of Central Province. On the other hand, Kenya’s small settler population created a world of distilled Englishness, where elements of class privilege represented a colonial utopia, in which African tribes played the supporting role of servants. The settlers’ lifestyle translated white supremacy into an aesthetic template that could be communicated in the metropole. Kenya before independence had thus been, as the historian David Anderson noted, an exceptional case for British public opinion. However, this special position did not survive the Winds of Change. With the end of empire, Kenya’s brand of colonial imagery lost its currency. Even authors like Elspeth Huxley, who enjoyed vast metropolitan success in the 1950s and the early 1960s with novels that described life in Kenya’s settler communities, were quickly side-lined to the margins of Britain’s literary production. British popular culture thus also turned away from the most obvious example of settler excess, or the Mau Mau emergency. The handover of Kenya to the hands of Kenyatta, his subsequent call for settlers to remain and build the new nation, and the economic success of the emerging nation all contributed to burying the memory of the Kenyan war as a short side note in the process of peaceful decolonisation. As there was no significant Kenyan immigration to the former metropole, Britain did not become the site of popular contestation of its Kenyan drama. Kenya inspired some cinematic productions in the 1980s, namely the British production White Mischief (1987) and the American Oscar winner Out of Africa (1985), which addressed white lifestyle in colonial

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30 On settler society, see Lonsdale, John, ‘Kenya; Home County and African Frontier’, in: Bickers (ed.), Settlers and Expatriates: Britons Over the Seas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 74–111, or Lorcin, Patricia, Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women’s Narratives of Algeria and Kenya 1900–present (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

31 See Interview with David Anderson on Radiolab, 3 July 2015; accessible online: http://www.radiolab.org/story/mau-mau/ (last accessed 15 September 2015).

32 On settler writing in the 1950s and especially Elspeth Huxley, see Lorcin, 2011, pp. 245–51, and Nicholls, Christine, Elspeth Huxley: A Biography (London: Harper Collins, 2002).

33 See Branch, Daniel, Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963–2012 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).
Kenya. Both recycled images of settler lifestyle and did not portray the Mau Mau conflict.

Simultaneously, public silence over colonial Kenya contrasted sharply with academic interest. In 1995, Susan Carruthers even noted that the Mau Mau conflict had become a favourite topic with Africanist historians. Yet, while nascent African Studies examined the Kenyan insurgency and acknowledged British brutality, their focus was far more on African agency and on the ways Africans tried to forge their own future in the colonial world. Academic interest, therefore, did not translate into any public debate. This lack of success owed much to academic priorities as well: even as academic works existed, they did not seek to actively engage with popular discourse in Britain and place Mau Mau within a particularly national context on the other. By the early 2000s, Bruce Berman deplored a ‘complete public ignorance’, where the large volume of Africanist research about Kenya and in particular the Mau Mau insurgency did not trickle down to a broader public—and often not even to non-Africanist scholars. Historians of Kenya and the insurgency became increasingly aware of the discrepancy between the hyper visibility of the violence of Kenyan decolonisation in the 1950s and its erasure of the public mind. While John Lonsdale or Susan Carruthers observed this silence from the academic sidelines, the Africanist historian David Anderson—then based in London’s School of Oriental and African Studies—was far more interested in raising public awareness and inciting a debate. Anderson’s main interest—related to his examination of court records from more than 1000 hangings in Kenya—was to target’s Britain’s abuse of its justice system and the colonial tweaking of power and rule of law. He wanted to address British responsibility rather than contribute to a debate about whether empire had been simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

34 In the mid-1960s, works such as Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham’s The Myth of Mau-Mau (1966) or Josiah Mwangi Kariuki’s “Mau-Mau” Detainee (1963) defined Mau-Mau as a radical nationalist struggle against Western colonialism. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the interpretation of events shifted to include analyses of the conflict as a peasant war and later a class conflict within Kikuyu society. Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale’s 1992 work Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa was the first synthesis of these theories into an account of a multi-layered conflict.

35 Carruthers, 1995, p. 28.

36 Berman, Bruce, ‘Mau-Mau and the Politics of Knowledge: The Struggle Continues’, in: Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Camadienne des Études Africaines, vol. 41. no. 3 (2007), p. 533.
Anderson was thus responsible for the 2002 BBC2 documentary *Kenya: White Terror*. The film, made by John McGhie, a former student of John Lonsdale, followed the work of a young American historian and David Anderson’s former supervisee, Caroline Elkins, who had spent years collecting oral history evidence from Kikuyu men and women in Kenya’s Central Province. The *BBC Correspondent* team presented the documentary as a revelation about the forgotten history of British decolonisation. Elkins, as the documentary’s main hero, embodied this forgetfulness through an account of her own personal story. She claimed she had begun working on her history dissertation in African Studies in the late 1990s, initially unaware of the violence of Britain’s campaign in Kenya and had thought she would be researching an event of large-scale benevolent rehabilitation of colonial insurgents. Elkins subsequently realised that the British archives had been cleansed, and thus went to Kenya to interview the victims and seek out the full story. The narrative of ‘the erstwhile gullible American student who through a mere coincidence ends up uncovering the British colonial establishment’s secrets’ was not entirely credible in the academic context of the 1990s, but it provided a relatable backstory for a documentary. What is more, for audiences unexposed to Africanist literature, the programme was revelatory and exposed British atrocities in Kenya for the first time since the 1960s. It addressed the scale of the violence and produced shock value through visceral descriptions of torture, abuse and rape. Interviews with former victims of torture and sexual violence presented a far more immediate image of colonial excesses in Kenya than ever before.

The programme addressed British responsibility, as interview scenes showed Elkins specifically asking whether perpetrators had been British. To show two facets of ‘Britishness’ in Kenya, the documentary included interviews with two white Britons involved in the Kenya crisis. The first was John Nottingham, a former colonial administrator who had quit his job in anger over British atrocities and remained in Kenya thereafter. Describing his experiences of violence perpetrated by the British, he concluded his testimony with an admission of shame ‘for coming from a Britain that did what it did here’. The second interview was with Terence

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37 Interview David Anderson with author, Oxford, 16 October 2015.
38 See BBC2, *Correspondent, Kenya: White Terror*, first aired on 17 November 2002.
39 In a later review of Elkins’ book, the historian Bruce Berman noted that ‘if, at that late date, she still believed in the official British line about its so-called civilising mission in the empire, then she was perhaps the only scholar or graduate student in the English-speaking world who did’. See Berman, 2007, p. 533.
Gavaghan, a pensioner based in Putney, identified as the person who had initiated and encouraged beatings and torture of inmates in the camps he oversaw. He denied ever partaking in acts of torture and claimed that not a single one of the 20,000 prisoners in his camps had died. When asked whether he had ever given others the order to beat prisoners, however, he reacted with silence and the menacing statement: ‘I am looking at you with certain thoughts in my mind.’\footnote{Ibid.} In a documentary that aimed at breaking a taboo about Britain’s self-perception, both men represented blueprints of British identity: Nottingham was the face of responsibility, while Gavaghan conveniently played the role of the unrepentant villain.

In January 2005, Caroline Elkins published her book \textit{Britain’s Gulag},\footnote{Elkins, 2005; published in the US under the title \textit{Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya}.} a week after David Anderson’s book \textit{Histories of the Hanged}\footnote{See Anderson, 2005.} had seen the light of day. The publication of these works was a game changer in the popularisation of academic research on Kenya, partly because both books had commercial publishers. Elkins’ publisher had originally planned to publish her book six months later, but pushed the date forward when they got wind of Anderson’s publication.\footnote{Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015.} As a result, the simultaneous publication of two books on the subject became an event. The two books were temporally complementary: Anderson mainly concentrated on the war years between 1952 and 1956, while Elkins’ book focused on the period between 1954 and 1959. They relied on different sources and addressed different subjects. Anderson’s main sources had been court cases of the 1090 prisoners sentenced to hanging by the colonial authorities. As court files had documented prisoners’ lengthy and detailed testimonies, Anderson gained insights into the motivations of Mau Mau fighters and the British system of justice that sentenced them to death. The story he told uncovered the essence of British brutality in perverting the colonial justice system.\footnote{Ibid.} Elkins, on the other hand, based her book on interviews she had conducted with Kikuyu veterans. These interviews, supplemented with archival material, succeeded in giving the fullest and most detailed account of the horrors of the detention camps and prison villages used to
'rehabilitate’ Mau-Mau warriors and cut them off from the Kikuyu civilian population.\textsuperscript{45}

Out of the two books, Elkins’ received greater attention. Firstly, this was the result of how Elkins had promoted her own story, self-fashioned as a historian and an activist alike. The preface to her book repeated the story of the unsuspecting scholar ‘intending to write a history of the success of Britain’s civilising mission in the detention camps of Kenya’.\textsuperscript{46} Elkins suggested that her book was a way to break the silence that had been the source of her alleged ignorance. Secondly, in many instances, Elkins prioritised a combative style, sometimes mixed with inaccurate data, to maximise her portrayal of British atrocities. In a balance-sheet logic that sought to prove mainly that Britain had behaved very badly, Elkins insisted that British atrocities needed to be read together with the main horrors of the twentieth century. The title of her book directly compared the British system of camps to Soviet-style oppression, while she repeatedly compared British colonialism to Nazism in the book. Simultaneously, she used inflated numbers of casualties in the conflict, an act that aimed at showing that the Mau Mau conflict had not been any less significant than the crimes of Nazism and Stalinism.

Most national newspapers in Britain thus reviewed Elkins’ book, often together with Anderson’s work. Even commentators—like Max Hastings—who noted that Elkins’ ‘anger causes her to eschew intellectual rigour in favour of a good deal of somewhat inelegantly written ranting’, could not dismiss the stories of oppression told in these two books and concluded that the British should not ‘feel any complacency about our own historic excesses’.\textsuperscript{47} The main thread that connected nearly all reviews was the books’ ‘revelatory’ character, or in the words of the \textit{Guardian}’s Richard Dawden, ‘a jolt to our memory’.\textsuperscript{48} They commended the books’ potential to trigger outrage at the scale of the violence, but also at the fact these events had been forgotten despite being well-known at the time.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45}See Elkins, 2005.
\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., p. xii.
\textsuperscript{47}\textit{Sunday Telegraph}, 9 January 2005.
\textsuperscript{48}The \textit{Guardian}, 5 February 2005. Hardly any reviews sought to discredit the books’ authority. Only one review, Nicholas Best’s in the \textit{Telegraph}, deplored the ‘image of the British that will be unrecognisable to the many thousands of doctors, vets, nurses, teachers […] who gave their lives to that country without ever torturing, raping or murdering anyone’. See \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 15 January 2005.
\textsuperscript{49}See, for example, Bernard Porter in the \textit{London Review of Books}, 3 March 2005.
Expressing a sense of shock upon learning of Britain’s misconduct, some commentators also called for a broad national debate about the meaning of the Mau-Mau excesses. Ben MacIntyre, a correspondent for the *Times* and a former student of David Anderson, was one of them. In a piece called ‘*Bury a Painful Past—or Dig It Up?*’ he described the Mau-Mau case as ‘a dingy act of amnesia by Britain that has never been acknowledged’.\textsuperscript{50} The act of wilful forgetfulness appeared again, in an editorial of the *Independent*:

> We do not so much whitewash the great injustices that Britain has had a hand in over the centuries […] as we ignore them […] Children—quite rightly—learn about the horrors of the Holocaust in the Second World War […] but how many schoolchildren learn about the brutal handling of the Mau-Mau insurgency in Kenya?\textsuperscript{51}

Despite the broad reception of Anderson and Elkins by 2005, it would nonetheless be an exaggeration to assume that the two historians revolutionised the public debate. Firstly, the two books were not successful enough to reach a truly broad audience. Anderson bemoaned the fact that the simultaneous appearance of the two books may have reduced the value of both books by placing them in competition with one another.\textsuperscript{52} Secondly, unlike the snowball effect of the torture debate in France, positive book reviews did not attract a wave of public reactions. The books’ momentum petered out quickly with little public engagement with the issues formulated around Elkins’ accusation of torture and Anderson’s focus on the subversion of colonial justice and the ensuing responsibility of the state.

At the same time, Anderson and Elkins needed to deal with a small, but coordinated, relentless and distracting campaign by Terence Gavaghan, the Putney-based pensioner who had overseen grave abuse of power and the use of torture in the camp Pipeline, to discredit their work.\textsuperscript{53} After the airing of the BBC documentary in 2002, Gavaghan filed a complaint

\textsuperscript{50} The *Times*, 1 October 2005.
\textsuperscript{51} *Independent*, 23 April 2005.
\textsuperscript{52} Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015.
\textsuperscript{53} Elkins personally named Gavaghan in *Britain’s Gulag*, p. 322. Simultaneously, references to Gavaghan’s personal responsibility and use of torture have been in many documents since; see Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015.
against the broadcaster for failing to warn him he would be asked about his involvement in torture. In February 2005, just after the launch of Elkins’ and Anderson’s works, Ofcom partially upheld Gavaghan’s complaint and forced the BBC to apologise.\(^{54}\) Simultaneously, David Elstein, an independent television executive, Gavaghan’s neighbour and ‘drinking buddy’,\(^{55}\) weighed in to help publicise the BBC’s apology.\(^{56}\) Elstein’s main goal was to discredit Caroline Elkins’ deductions on the number of detainees and victims. To do so, he sent letters to every large newspaper that had published a favourable review of Elkins’ books\(^{57}\) and demanded that they qualify her work ‘more as propaganda than as history’ due to her tinkering with numbers.\(^{58}\) Elstein referred to a claim by Elkins that her research had proven that the official numbers of 12,000 deaths and 80,000 detainees had to be understatements covering up the truth. While on the subject of male detainees in the Pipeline, she raised the numbers to between double and quadruple the official number, Elkins’ book evaluated the total Kikuyu death toll up to 300,000.\(^{59}\) She substantiated this with a botched and vague footnote about drawing data from the 1948 and 1962 censuses. To make matters even worse, the paperback edition of Elkins’ book stated that ‘tens of thousands of detainees—and possibly a hundred thousand or more—died’.\(^{60}\) This statement supported a number of 100,000, which Elkins later used as ‘her’ data.\(^{61}\) Elstein picked up on this discrepancy in his

\(^{54}\) See the *Guardian*, 15 February 2005.

\(^{55}\) Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015.

\(^{56}\) See, for example, Elstein’s comment *BBC’s Carte Blanche?* On broadcastnow.co.uk from 3 March 2005: http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/comment-bbccs-carte-blanche/1020846. article (last accessed 10 October 2015). Elstein’s sole motivation in embarking on this campaign was his personal relationship with Gavaghan. See the *Guardian*, 7 April 2008. Simultaneously, David Anderson suggests that he was only interested in causing mayhem upon Gavaghan’s prodding. See Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015.

\(^{57}\) These include the *Guardian*, which received 11 complaints (see the *Guardian*, 7 April 2008), the *London Review of Books* (see the *London Review of Books*, 2 June 2005) and the *New York Review of Books* (see the *New York Review of Books*, 23 June 2005).

\(^{58}\) *New York Review of Books*, 23 June 2005.

\(^{59}\) Elkins, 2005, pp. 233–74. See also Elkins, Caroline, ‘Detention, Rehabilitation and the Destruction of Kikuyu Society’, in: Atieno-Adhiambo, Elisha and Lonsdale, John (eds.), *Mau-Mau & Nationhood: Arms, Authority & Narration* (James Currey, 2003), p. 205.

\(^{60}\) Elkins, 2005, p. xiv.

\(^{61}\) Elkins seems to have corroborated the number of 100,000 as ‘based on her book’ during a phone call with the *Guardian’s* readers’ editor Siobhain Butterworth in 2007; see the *Guardian*, 7 April 2008.
attempts to find ways to shift any possible attention from charges of crimes committed by Gavaghan to criticising the historians who had raised them.

Elstein was only a one-man operation, but he was persistent and demanded a public hearing.\textsuperscript{62} ‘A well-known and visible figure in the small world of British broadcasting’,\textsuperscript{63} he knew how to make his voice heard. To some extent, he discouraged journalists and producers from taking up the subject of the Mau Mau, which was now seen as ‘controversial’. Moreover, the issue of numbers diverted attention away from the books’ substance and provided easy ammunition to anyone who was looking to dismiss Elkins’ research as biased and un-academic. The numbers controversy continued, as the demographer John Blacker published an article in 2007 that called Elkins’ numbers impossible, as there had not been enough adult male Kikuyu to support a death toll of 300,000. Blacker assessed the actual number of deaths as around 50,000 (although allowing for a large margin of error), half of which owing to infant and child mortality due to the harsh conditions of villagisation.\textsuperscript{64} The numbers controversy became a thorn in Elkins’ side, a subject to which she had to continuously return and clarify in order to be taken seriously.\textsuperscript{65}

However, the numbers debate reflected the importance of proving that the Mau Mau case was a ‘true atrocity’. Both Anderson and Elkins had published their books with the ambition of sparking a national conversation about Britain’s role in Kenya. Both were aware of the climate in which debates about empire descended into barren discussions about a ‘balance sheet’, in which commentators tried to appropriate Nazi references in order to discredit one side or the other. Anderson had hoped that his research—by the sheer force of its evidence—would cut through this and reach a broad public. However, he was taken aback by his former supervisee’s apparent willingness to abandon the terrain of rigorous research

\textsuperscript{62}In the case of the Guardian, which did not publish his letters, Elstein kept complaining. He sent 11 different letters and caused the paper’s external ombudsman to intervene in order to research the Guardian’s possible misconduct in ignoring Elstein. See John Wills’ report in the Guardian, 7 April 2008.

\textsuperscript{63}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{64}Blacker, John, ‘The Demography of Mau-Mau: Fertility and Mortality in Kenya in the 1950s: A Demographer’s Viewpoint’, in: African Affairs, vol. 106, no. 423 (2007), pp. 205–27.

\textsuperscript{65}For example, see Elkins’ article from 2011, in which she was required to give explanations for the numbers discrepancy before tackling any other issues: Elkins, Caroline, ‘Alchemy of Evidence: Mau-Mau, the British Empire, and the High Court of Justice’, in: The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, vol. 39, no. 5, December 2011, pp. 731–48.
and opt for unsubstantiated or impossible claims. Yet, in assessing the books’ ability to ‘make noise’, Elkins’ style and eagerness to inflate the numbers reflected an embrace of the ‘balance sheet’ approach in the detriment of history, but were pivotal in garnering attention. Her loose engagement with numbers was only part of her combative writing style that served to ‘upgrade’ the perception of the Kenyan emergency to one equal to the main atrocities of the twentieth century in order to make it ‘relatable’ to a wider British public. These accusations created a moral clarity that inspired activists and had the power to convince them of the importance of the Kenyan issue. David Anderson thus complained that years after the debunking of Elkins’ higher estimates as physically impossible, activists would most often approach him with these numbers, as they had discovered the issue through Elkins’ far more polemicising work.

Simultaneously, the controversies surrounding Elkins’ and Anderson’s works did not initiate any large-scale public reckoning with Britain’s colonial record. To some extent, this owed much to the fact that two academic-style works alone could not trigger a broad emotional reaction in the same way Le Monde’s article about Louisette Ighilahriz did. They told a harrowing story that concerned an abstract idea of British responsibility, but had very few living—or even fictional—protagonists to make this story enter the living rooms of contemporary British families. The one man who embodied Britain’s systematic use of torture, Terence Gavaghan, did not materialise as the British Aussaresses or even Jacques Massu, but rather as a man who successfully diverted media attention from himself and from any introspection of the Kenyan insurgency. The same could be said of the victims, who also remained absent from the British media. In the telling of the Mau-Mau story, there were no well-educated Kikuyu victims who were able to speak without Caroline Elkins’ mediation, nor were there any Kikuyu descendants in Britain who demanded to be heard as British citizens.

On the other hand, the publication of Adam Foulds’ Costa Award-winning poem The Broken Word in 2008 was a small sign of the impact of the coverage of Elkins and Anderson. The lengthy poem describes the

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66 See Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015.

67 Ibid.

68 One Kikuyu voice available to a broad readership was the California-based Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who thematised the Kenyan emergency in his books, but did not do so for a specific British readership. See wa Thiong’o, Ngugi, Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir (London: Harvill Secker, 2010).

69 Foulds, Adam, The Broken Word (London: Cape Poetry, 2008).
transformation and moral degradation of Tom, a young settler who returns home to Kenya from Oxford and finds himself embroiled in the violence of the Mau Mau insurgency and its repression. The poem concentrates on violence and its impact on the young man as he becomes more and more involved in the systematic oppression of the Kikuyu, deploying a mix of visceral descriptions and minimalist, lyrical strophes. Before his work on the poem, Foulds had had no relationship with Kenya—or Africanists—whatsoever. He discovered the issue through the *London Review of Books* review of Elkins and Anderson in 2005, was intrigued by the fact he had previously never heard about it, and decided to write about it, as ‘there developed a sort of grandiose hope […] that it might take its place alongside those books [Elkins’ and Anderson’s], as a piece of history that will bring it back into the conscious and the imagination of British readers’.70

Elkins and Anderson thus paved the way to break the silence on Kenya. Yet, unlike in France, where historians and activists have always successfully articulated the case for ‘coming to terms with the past’ within an appeal to a political category of ‘a duty to remember’, this was not the case in Britain. Benjamin Stora, but also other French historians, called for a debate about the soul of the country and showed the way forward in the form of the possibility to acknowledge the nation’s crimes and ‘move on’. David Anderson did not have this political vocabulary to rely on. As a historian, he was torn between academic practice and a political conversation that presented colonial history in normative binaries and did not prioritise memory as a political category. Caroline Elkins filled the slot of the angry historian who attacked those in favour of a ‘positive’ view of empire. Yet she did so as an outside commentator who made accusations, but did not embed these with Stora-style demands for coming to terms with painful memories for the sake of the future. In so doing, she strengthened the impression that the balance-sheet approach was the best way to get public attention, yet did not articulate a vision beyond it.

70See interview with Adam Foulds in *Dulwich OnView*; accessible online: http://dulwichonview.org.uk/2009/01/27/costa-poetry-prize-winner-adam-foulds/ (last accessed 15 October 2019).
The Mau Mau Trial—Reparative Justice or a Site of Memory?

While Elkins and Anderson struggled to reach larger audiences in their capacity as historians, the Mau-Mau case was about to make political headlines. In 2002, just a week before Kenya: White Terror was aired on the BBC, the Kenyan Mau-Mau War Veterans Association (MMWVA) announced its plan to sue the British government for compensation for torture. With the exception of a sympathetic interview with David Anderson on Radio 4, comments expressed fury over the Kenyan decision. They narrated the story of the Mau-Mau as a straightforward battle between Britain and a terrorist insurgency and focused on experiences of British servicemen, of whom only a few remained to give any testimony. Family members only thus suggested that ‘the Mau-Mau caused such a great deal of trouble that for them to suggest they were the victims is preposterous’. Simultaneously, the go-to person in terms of providing first-hand accounts seemed to be Terence Gavaghan, who was introduced as the ‘officer in charge of rehabilitating 20,000 African prisoners between 1957 and 1958’, and who vented his frustration at ‘the name of the game now—everyone in this country now claims compensation’.

At first, the MMWVA had no clear strategy. The organisation had operated under the Kenyan government’s upholding of the colonial ban on Mau-Mau membership. This changed in 2003, as the Kenyan government revoked the law and paved the way to legality for the MMWVA. Shortly thereafter, the association approached the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) to take up their case and seek compensation for Mau-Mau veterans who had been victims of torture in the 1950s. In 2006, the KHRC approached the London-based human-rights lawyers Leigh, Day and Co. to represent their case against the British government.

71 See David Anderson on BBC Radio 4, Today, 10 November 2002. For other commentaries, see stories in the Sunday Telegraph, 10 November 2002, or Daily Mirror, 11 November 2002.

72 Sunday Telegraph, 10 November 2002.

73 The Kenyan government had initially upheld colonial subsidiary legislation no. 913 from 12 August 1950, prohibiting the membership of the Mau-Mau.

74 See Interview Daniel Leader, partner, Leigh & Day, with author 30 October 2015; see also Leigh & Day internal brochure, Leigh & Day Solicitors, Mau-Mau, 1952–2013 (London, 2013). Leigh & Day’s history also included representing British former POWs who sought compensation from the Japanese government for torture they had endured while in captivity.
Leigh & Day solicitors were at first sceptical of the ‘legal merits’ of the case, as the time that had elapsed since the 1950s would make it difficult to move past the limitations hurdle. However, they decided to take the case on ‘moral grounds’, relying on the availability of research and the small buzz created by the publication of Elkins’ and Anderson’s works.\(^{75}\) By 2009, Leigh & Day had identified five claimants, three men and two women, and decided to go forward with the case. One of the men, Paulo Nzili, had been a Mau-Mau fighter who had left during an amnesty, but had been arrested anyway. The second man, Ndiku Mutua, had never actively joined the Mau-Mau, but had supplied them with four of his employer’s cows. The third man, Wmbuga wa Nyingi, claimed he had never been a Mau-Mau, but had been arrested nonetheless. He had been to the Hola Camp and beaten so badly that he was thought dead and left to lie with the other 11 corpses in the sun until he received treatment and survived. The two women had been sympathisers who had provided food to the Mau-Mau. All the men had been tortured, and two of them castrated. Both women had suffered sexual abuse.

In June 2009, Leigh & Day issued its claim. Twenty Kenyan veterans travelled to London and participated in a press conference. The press showed limited interest in the story, which it mainly framed as a human-interest story of five elderly Kenyans who travelled ‘4,000 miles to London to secure an apology’.\(^{76}\) On BBC Radio 4, Martyn Day framed the case in terms of abstract justice rather than monetary reparations: ‘This case is about bringing all those issues [of colonial abuse] before the British court and a British judge to say “what we did was wrong”’.\(^{77}\) No account—with the exception of the Daily Mail which ignored the budding case at this stage—doubted the claimants’ stories, relying mainly on Elkins’ work for corroboration.\(^{78}\)

Simultaneously, Leigh & Day produced a document called *Options for Justice*, which they sent to the FCO. The law firm focused on the claimants’ need for recognition and a government apology rather than ‘big pots

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\(^{75}\) See Interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015: ‘those two works [Elkins’ and Anderson’s] were what made us believe we’d have a stab at it. We thought we’d lose, but we thought we’d have a stab at it and not be laughed out of court.’

\(^{76}\) The Independent, 24 June 2009.

\(^{77}\) BBC Radio 4, Today, 23 June 2009.

\(^{78}\) See the Guardian, 23 June 2009; the Times, 23 June 2009; the Express, 24 June 2009; Independent on Sunday, 28 June 2009.
of money’.79 Leigh & Day then engaged with the then Foreign Secretary David Miliband in order to find an out-of-court settlement. From the lawyers’ perspective, Miliband and the FCO seemed receptive to such a compromise, but the 2010 elections resulted in a change of government and ‘the channels of communication ceased completely’.80 Shortly thereafter, the FCO applied to strike out the case on two legal arguments. Firstly, the FCO claimed that on the grounds of Britain’s past colonial law, liability had been transferred to the Kenyan government. British law envisaged the crown as divisible, which defined the Kenyan colony as a constitutionally separate legal entity to the metropole. Along these lines, even as the British government issued orders in Kenyan matters, it acted in the name of the Kenyan entity rather than in the name of the UK. Independence then transferred responsibility for colonial acts from the colonial Kenyan entity directly to the Kenyan government. This argument would have legally absolved any British official from condoning the use of torture up to the highest levels of government.81 Secondly, the FCO argued for limitations, in that too much time had elapsed since the acts of torture in order to allow for a fair trial.82

The first hearing was scheduled for April 2011 to address the subject of liability. Leigh & Day’s strategy for this first instance consisted mainly in working with three historians to produce witness statements about the direct complicity of the British government in torture in Kenya. Of the three historians, Caroline Elkins was the first to join the legal team in 2008. David Anderson followed suit in 2010 and, lastly, Huw Bennett joined thereafter. Both Elkins and Anderson had been sceptical at first about working on a lawsuit. Elkins had been worried about the seriousness of the law firm and its commitment to securing a just settlement for the victims. Anderson had further misgivings, most notably that a blanket settlement for compensation would benefit not only real victims of British abuse but also Mau-Mau veterans who had committed atrocities.83 Both ultimately decided to join the team, however, and were joined by a third historian, Huw Bennett, whose doctoral thesis had examined the British military’s tactics of counter-insurgency in Kenya. Bennett’s contribution

79 See interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid. See also the Guardian, 25 January 2010.
82 Ibid.
83 Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015. See also the Times, 23 June 2009.
was the most vital in this first hearing, as he had been able to follow a trail of documents that connected the British military—rather than the government—to the practice of torture and thus to prove continuous liability.84 Simultaneously, during preparations for the first hearing, Leigh & Day submitted a witness statement by David Anderson demanding to see documents that had been missing from the archives, pruned by the FCO during the process of decolonisation. Elkins had surreptitiously claimed that the archives in Kew had been cleansed. However, her backstory that focused on her individual, brave struggle against British obstructionism and discovery of Mau-Mau atrocities did not leave space for her to mention that the sweeping of colonial archives had been a well-known fact since the 1960s and 1970s. Anderson presented the court with correspondence between the Kenyan government and the British Foreign Office, where the former had demanded to see documents whisked away from Kenya and the latter refused to provide them, yet in so doing confirmed their existence.85 Due to disclosure obligations, the FCO initiated an internal search for the documents. This procedure bore fruit due to the personal investment of the Kenya desk officer, whom the *Times* described as ‘the unstoppable Edward Inglett’.86 He was particularly persistent in tracking down the documents and forced a hitherto publicly unknown facility in Hanslope Park, Buckinghamshire, to release boxes of documents relevant to the case. The government then disclosed thousands of documents to Leigh & Day in order to meet the deadline for the hearing set for three months later.

For the legal case, the importance of the Hanslope Park discovery was that it ‘painted in technicolour what everyone […] had already known’.87 The documents did not reveal anything new about the use of torture in Kenya, nor were they necessary to prove the British government had been aware of atrocities. However, they provided details that illustrated vividly the extent of government and military involvement in decision-making regarding torture in Kenya. For the public, the Hanslope Park discovery helped give the case further significance. On 5 April 2011, before the hearing, the *Times* published a front-page article about the impending

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84 Interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015.
85 On Anderson’s longstanding involvement with the quest of finding the culled archives, see Anderson, David, ‘Guilty Secrets: Deceit, Denial, and the Discovery of Kenya’s “Migrated Archive”’, in: *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2015, pp. 142–60.
86 The *Times*, 8 April 2011.
87 Interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015.
court case and the discovery of the Hanslope Park archives. Ben MacIntyre, the *Times* editor responsible for the article, quoted David Anderson’s statement that ‘these documents were hidden away to protect the guilty’. What is more, MacIntyre quoted from a ‘top secret’ memo concerning a set of documents that might ‘embarrass HMG, might embarrass members of the police, military forces, public servants and others’. The publication of the news about Hanslope Park turned the court hearing into a story about the British government’s cover-up of torture. As MacIntyre and other journalists continued reporting on the Mau-Mau case, they quoted from documents like a telegram from 1955 sent from the Governor of Kenya Evelyn Baring to the Secretary of State for Colonies Alan Lennox Boyd, which conveyed details of a man that had been burned alive, or Kenya’s attorney general’s letter that contained the ominous line, ‘if we are going to sin, we must sin quietly’. These instances of British officials with a guilty conscience who were conspiring to hide atrocities from their own public made the story appealing to a British audience and triggered comments along the lines of Matthew Parris’ column in the *Times*:

> What most tellingly condemns some of what is now emerging from secret archives on Kenya is how strenuously people tried to keep them secret. They knew at the time that some of what was being done was shameful, and if disclosed would be seen as disgraceful at the time. [...] Secrecy is the clue. If people won’t defend in public what they’re doing while they’re doing it, then let them not, half a century later, plead altered national values.

The *Times*’ decision to cover the Mau-Mau trial as a front-page story for a whole week thereafter took nearly everyone—not least Leigh & Day lawyers—by surprise. During this week, the *Times* gave special attention to the case like no other news outlet before, during and after the hearing. Other outlets dedicated their first-page space during this week to the hacking allegations against *News of the World*, which the Murdoch-owned *Times* preferred to elegantly omit. Nonetheless, the reason the newspaper chose to cover the Mau-Mau trial instead of any other news story was Ben MacIntyre’s personal involvement. MacIntyre, a former student of David

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88 The *Times*, 5 April 2011.
89 The *Independent*, 8 April 2011; the *Times*, 8 April 2011; the *Guardian*, 8 April 2011.
90 The *Times*, 8 April 2011.
91 The *Times*, 9 April 2011.
92 Interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015.
Anderson, had a personal interest in the Kenyan case. Just as MacIntyre consulted Anderson in the case, so did Anderson give MacIntyre access to classified documents—for which Leigh & Day were reprimanded in court—and tried to use the *Times* as an outlet to reach the general public. The cooperation between the two resulted in the publication of three editorials about the Mau-Mau case and one long opinion piece signed by David Anderson. Most poignantly, the editorials and the opinion piece called for the Mau-Mau case to be used to re-examine Britain’s national narrative and the role decolonisation played in it; for example, the 7 April editorial stated:

> It [the Hanslope Park discovery] is also, potentially, the cue for a fundamental national reimagining of the last days of the British Empire. This country has long prided itself on a cleaner past than many other former colonial powers. If this is to remain the case, the truth, no matter how many yards of chaotic shelving it occupies, must emerge.

Here, Anderson showed his desire to focus the debate on what he saw as the core issues at stake: the perverting of colonial justice and Britain’s long-term responsibility. However, unlike Benjamin Stora in France—or indeed Caroline Elkins—he shied away from prioritising the appeal to public emotion over the presentation of sound historical analysis. He presented well-formulated indictments rather than Elkins’ outrage. Simultaneously, his reluctance to simplify his message into a clear moral soundbite could have been one of the reasons the case did not stir a higher degree of public emotion. Nonetheless, the hearing on 7 April 2011 began with ‘huge crowds’ in court owing to the publicity generated by the *Times*. These visitors petered out on the second day after realising the hearing consisted of dry, legal arguments. However, Leigh & Day’s strategy of concentrating on the British army and its links to London overrode the government’s wish to throw out the case on liability charges. On 21
July, the judge confirmed that the claimants had a legal case against the British government.98

The second hearing, due to discuss the limitations issue, was set for the subsequent year, July 2012. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu made a direct appeal to the British government and called on it to show ‘magnanimity and compassion’ towards the elderly Kenyan claimants on the eve of the trial,99 the hearing began with displays of media support for the claimants. This support also resulted in calls from editorials of left-wing publications to ‘come to terms’ with Britain’s colonial past, such as the Independent’s call:

There is a moral obligation that cannot be dodged. Indeed, it is a disgrace that the plaintiffs have been forced to fight so hard and so long for even a chance of redress […] But there is also a broader point here. It is also high time that Britain faced up to—and took responsibility for—the less palatable realities of our colonial past.100

This general sympathy for the claimants—an example of old victims of torture seeking redress—increased after the second day of the hearing. After the claimants had given their testimonies in the witness box, the government QC began his cross-examination with an acknowledgement that the government ‘does not dispute that each of the claimants suffered torture and other ill treatment at the hands of the colonial administration’.101 He thus acknowledged the claimants’ moral case and focused the case’s entire attention on the technical detail of limitations and whether a contemporary investigation could establish the truth about the responsibility for torture in Kenya in the 1950s. While the government’s case relied on the fact that most men at the top of the chain of command had since died

98 See the Evening Standard, 21 July 2011, and the Telegraph, 22 July 2011. During the interview, Daniel Leader alluded to his impression that the judge’s interpretation of the law and verdict in favour of Leigh & Day was based on a visceral, emotional reaction to reading the evidence of torture in Kenya, as ‘you could see how his face turned red with fury when reading these descriptions […] It just went against his idea of British fair play’ (Interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015). It is only striking that the same emotional reaction could not be recreated on a larger scale.

99 See the Guardian and the Times, 16 July 2012. Moreover, Tutu’s call received broad and sympathetic reception in a selection of local and regional media not otherwise prone to cover the Mau-Mau case. See Yorkshire Post, 16 July 2012, and the Herald, 17 July 2012.

100 The Independent, 17 July 2012.

101 The Independent and the Times, 18 July 2012, and Interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015.
and were therefore unavailable for questioning, the rich documentation led the judge to rule in favour of the Kenyan plaintiffs.¹⁰² The government appealed the decision, but quickly changed its mind and entered negotiations with Leigh & Day for an out-of-court-settlement. In June 2013, both sides reached an agreement and announced a settlement of £14 million to be paid to 5000 victims of torture (overall nearly £20 million government expenditure, or £2600 per person), combined with funding a monument to be built in Nairobi.¹⁰³ On that very day, the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, declared that ‘the British Government recognises that Kenyans were subjected to torture and other forms of ill-treatment at the hands of the colonial administration. The British Government sincerely regrets that these abuses took place and that they marred Kenya’s progress to independence’.¹⁰⁴

Hague’s pronouncement ended a process of reparatory justice and met with broad approval from the press. Ben MacIntyre concluded that the admission ‘should be a source of national pride’,¹⁰⁵ while even smaller, regional outlets took notice. The *Western Mail* dedicated its editorial to the case, noting that ‘the decision […] should give the UK a new determination to hold the highest standards of conduct in even the most dangerous circumstances’.¹⁰⁶ Even conservative media like the *Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* also ran pieces that condemned Britain’s use of torture.¹⁰⁷ The press thus portrayed the settlement as a triumph of a British culture of ‘fair play’ in dealing with one exceptional dark stain on the country’s history. Simultaneously and unsurprisingly, some conservative voices criticised the settlement, especially on the issue of the ‘£20 million bill on Kenya’.¹⁰⁸ The *Telegraph*, despite welcoming Britain’s admission of guilt, bemoaned the fact that British taxpayers’ money was being handed out to terrorists.¹⁰⁹ Here, the *Daily Mail*’s coverage illustrated the most notable

¹⁰² Interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015, and the *Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Sun*, the *Guardian*, the *Times*, 6 October 2012.
¹⁰³ These victims were identified by a team of Leigh & Day lawyers sent to Kenya in 2013 to interview men and women subjected to torture by the British army. See Interview Daniel Leader with author, 30 October 2015. See also the *Times*, 6 October 2012.
¹⁰⁴ See the *Times*, the *Herald*, the *Independent*, 7 June 2013.
¹⁰⁵ The *Times*, 7 June 2013.
¹⁰⁶ *Western Mail*, 7 June 2013.
¹⁰⁷ See the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, 7 June 2013.
¹⁰⁸ The *Sun*, 7 June 2013.
¹⁰⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 2013.
development. In the early phases of the court proceedings, the newspaper oscillated between limited coverage and outright disdain for the claims, as in the story titled ‘Why Mau-Mau claims of British brutality are the reverse of the truth, by a man who fought them’. These stories focused on Mau-Mau barbarity, or mocked Leigh & Day as dangerous ‘no win no fee lawyers’, as in a commentary about how ‘the Kenyan case is properly the business of the historians, not of Britain’s legal vulture culture’. However, by the time the settlement had been announced, the weight of evidence together with the government’s embarrassment at the discovery of the Hanslope Park archives tilted the scale towards an acceptance of the claimants’ accusations.

Simultaneously, however, the legal proceedings of the Mau-Mau case ended with another side effect that did not encourage further debate. What had begun as an opportunity to incite a broader debate about the end of empire turned into a case that highlighted an ‘exception’. Still in 2005, Elkins’ unrefined tirades about Britain’s ‘civilising mission’ triggered reactions that judged Kenya within the ‘balance sheet’ of Britain’s overall imperial project, whether comparing it to the Holocaust or demanding to focus on the good of the railways. As the case gained traction commentators discussed Kenyan torture increasingly in the same breath as references to Malaya, Cyprus and Aden. In particular, the discovery of the Hanslope Park archives put the spotlight (for a limited time) on the general colonial aspect of the case, as the hidden documents reflected a recurrent colonial practice of culling information that could be ‘embarrassing to HRM’. The scale of the discovery illustrated that such colonial misconduct was not unique to Kenya. The government’s fear that the Kenyan case might ‘open the floodgates’ for further compensation cases was one of the main reasons for its initial refusal to compromise on the Mau Mau lawsuit. However, the nature of legal proceedings aimed at overcoming barriers of liability and limitations encouraged a focus on the specificities of the Kenyan case and thus also made sure the floodgates remained shut. The legal debate therefore highlighted two elements specific to Kenya: firstly, the scale of atrocities committed in Kenya was superior to any other colonial wars of decolonisation. Secondly, due to previous levels of interest within the academic community, the level of documentary

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110 Daily Mail, 7 June 2010.
111 Daily Mail, 16 July 2012.
112 The Guardian, 27 December 2005 and Daily Telegraph, 15 January 2005.
evidence on Kenya was unique and allowed the court case to continue. Leigh & Day were not hired to incite a broad debate, but to reach a settlement for the Kenyan claimants. In much the same vein, William Hague issued the government acknowledgement of torture in Kenya, but also added that it did not apply to other colonial cases. Similarly, while the Foreign Secretary’s apology marked real progress, it lacked the symbolic nature—or even the practical appeal—of an apology by the Prime Minister, let alone the Crown. As such, the practicalities of reparations, which signalled turning the page on Kenya as an aberrational historical exception, proved detrimental to the logic of memory and its purpose of integrating Kenya into a broader British historical narrative.

THE BALANCE SHEETS ON THE DAILY MAIL

The balance-sheet approach became ever more visible after the slavery reparation debate (see Chap. 8) and RMF protests (see Chap. 9) made the idea of British colonial guilt return ever more often to the broadsheets. The appearance of the Indian politician Shashi Tharoor in front of the Oxford Union on 28 May 2015, in which he demanded Britain to pay reparations to India, added yet another accusatory voice to the fold. Tharoor’s subsequent book, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (2017), not only established Tharoor’s image as an oddly ‘radical’ politician in Britain, but he also became a household name for those looking for an imperial history that focused on British imperial crimes in India. As contestations of empire were increasing, the balance-sheet approach returned with a vengeance. Here again, academics played a key role. This time, however, the media did not hold back, and revelled in the drama that the ‘balance sheet’ approach provided, particularly through the conflict between the Oxford Theology Professor Nigel Biggar and the Cambridge English literature scholar Priyamvada Gopal. Notwithstanding, by 2017, the balance-sheet approach was becoming increasingly established in popular conversations about empire. Polling companies had developed a pattern of asking the public constantly whether it was ‘proud’ of the British empire, with around 50% of the

113 The Telegraph, 7 June 2013.
114 See the Independent, 22 July 2015, also on the number of 7.5 million views of Tharoor’s intervention on YouTube.
respondents often replying they were, indeed, proud of the empire. Pre-empting the controversy in 2017, Niall Ferguson tweeted a YouGov poll that suggested that 59% of Britons were proud of their empire, with the pithy caption ‘I won’.

Nigel Biggar, a high-ranking theology professor at the University of Oxford, who had previously been relatively unknown to the public, announced his entrance into the public arena through an article in the *Times* titled ‘Don’t feel guilty about our colonial history’. Biggar defended the article ‘The Case for Colonialism’ in the journal *Third World Quarterly*, which discussed the idea of recolonisation based on the claim that ‘Western colonialism was, as a general rule, both objectively beneficial and subjectively legitimate in most of the places where it was found’. The article, written by the Oregon-based political scientist Bruce Gilley had thus attracted the ire of mostly fellow academics around the world, but also many non-academics. Two petitions received over 16,000 signatures worldwide calling for the article to be retracted. Biggar, however, used the international academic controversy to present himself as a truth-teller to the British public, fighting ‘shame’ over imperial history. Biggar’s argument posited that while Britain’s imperial history had violent episodes—like the Amritsar Massacre in 1919—its general legacy was ‘complex’ and had to include the ‘good’ and ‘orderly’ sides of it. In a twist of Niall Ferguson’s downright claim that empire was essentially a good thing, Biggar pretended that his was a more nuanced argument. He thus focused on the ‘complexity’ of imperial history and aimed at a moral unshackling of Britain from its own guilt for the sake of future understanding of the

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115 See, for example, YouGov poll from 18 January 2016, where 44% of the respondents claimed empire was something to be ‘proud’ of: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/01/18/rhodes-must-not-fall (last accessed 20 April 2020), but also a much quotes one from 26 July 2014, in which 50% of the respondents claimed they were ‘proud’ of the empire: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire (last accessed 20 April 2020).

116 Twitter, Niall Ferguson (@nfregus), 6:22 pm, 20 July 2017.

117 The *Times*, 30 November 2017.

118 Gilley, Bruce, ‘The Case for Colonialism’, in: *Third World Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037, published online on 8 September 2017, then retracted. Accessible online on: http://www.web.pdx.edu/~gilleyb/2_The%20case%20for%20colonialism_at2Oct2017.pdf (last accessed 20 April 2020).

119 See, for example, the petition ‘Retract The Case for Colonialism’, published on Change.org: https://www.change.org/p/editors-of-the-third-world-quarterly-retract-the-case-for-colonialism (last accessed 20 April 2020).
world as it is. Lauding Gilley’s ‘courageous’ approach, Biggar also framed his use of the balance-sheet approach—or the idea that it was his duty to focus on the positive aspects of imperial history—as equally rebellious against a supposedly widespread culture of ‘shame’.120

In much the same way, Biggar then presented his new five-year research project, ‘Ethics and Empire’ at Oxford, which aimed at going against the grain of ‘most reaches of contemporary academic discourse’ and their knee-jerk assumption that ‘imperialism is wicked; and empire is therefore unethical’.121 Biggar thus presented the project’s goal of developing a ‘nuanced and historically intelligent Christian ethic of empire’ as resistance against academic orthodoxy rather than the work of an established professor who continues in the footsteps of Niall Ferguson, another successful professor. The project’s closed, invitation only seminars only reinforced this contradiction between discourse and reality. While such seminars at Oxford were a common elite phenomenon at an exclusive institution, Biggar justified these as a security measure against ‘bullying’ from fellow academics. Similarly, as 58 Oxford scholars penned an open letter criticising Biggar’s project,122 the Daily Mail, the Telegraph and the Times quickly intervened. They reported about the exchange as an instance of ‘bullying’ of Biggar’s desire to instil pride over empire.123 While the open letter denounced Biggar’s balance-sheet approach as ‘useless to historians’, the broadsheets embraced it wholeheartedly to report on new imperial controversies.

What is more, Nigel Biggar became an expert in using different right-wing media outlets, such as the online free-speech outlet Quillette, the magazine Standpoint or the more traditional Telegraph, to mark himself as a victim of a campaign by ‘equity activists trying to install affirmative action, and historical revisionists and ideologues trying to wreck Western canon in the name of “decolonization”’.124 In interviews and special media

120 The Times, 30 November 2017.
121 McDonald Centre, University of Oxford, Ethics and Empire, homepage: https://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/ethics-and-empire (last accessed 20 April 2020).
122 The Conversation, Ethics and empire: an open letter from Oxford scholars, 19 December 2017: https://theconversation.com/ethics-and-empire-an-open-letter-from-oxford-scholars-89333 (last accessed 20 April 2020).
123 See Daily Mail, 21 December 2017, the Telegraph, 20 December 2017 and the Times, 23 July 2017.
124 Quillette, ‘If I Want to Hold Seminars on the Topic of Empire, I Will Do So Privately’: An Interview with Nigel Biggar, 7 June 2018, https://quillette.com/2018/06/07/want-
portraits, Biggar spoke of ‘zealots’, who used tactics of ‘mob rule’ on social media—as well as ‘ad hominem attacks and lazy and promiscuous accusations of “racism” and “white supremacism”’—to shut down his project. As a result of their intimidation and out of fear for safety, Biggar claimed, he was forced to hold events in secret. In so doing, Biggar positioned the issue of evaluating empire as a defining feature in a debate that was mobilising a right-wing coalition in new media outlets online: free speech.

The right-wing free-speech movement, which Nigel Biggar mobilised, had begun in podcasts and blogs in the US that were often referred to as the ‘intellectual dark web’. It consisted in men who positioned themselves as public intellectuals who defended Western civilisation’s tradition of free-speech from the threat of left-wing academics eager to suppress it for the sake of ‘political correctness’. It is therefore telling that Biggar chose the conservative free-speech online outlet Quillette for his first major interview and then returned to feature on its podcast to pontificate on ‘academic outrage mobs’, brandishing himself as a British voice in a debate that was otherwise led from North America. Through commentaries like ‘it doesn’t surprise me at all that in the 1930s in Germany the Nazi Party was disproportionately represented among the ranks of academics. They’re not malicious but, […] they will take the path of least resistance’, Biggar mobilised Nazi references to address notions of academic conformity to left-wing dogma. He then equated this dogma with the belief of the inherent ‘wickedness’ of empire. His self-proclaimed role was therefore that of an independent thinker, who is able to represent ‘what passes for common sense in the general public’ against academic zealotry.

Simultaneously, the British media sought out one specific bogeyman, the Cambridge-based literary scholar Priyamvada Gopal, to contrast

hold-seminars-topic-empire-will-privately-interview-nigel-biggar/ (last accessed: 20 April 2020).

125 Ibid, see also the Telegraph, 23 February 2019 and Standpoint, 18 September 2019.
126 See, for example, Rozner, Gideon, ‘Inside the Intellectual Dark Web’, in: The Institute of Public Affairs Review: A Quarterly Review of Politics and Public Affairs, vol. 70, no. 3, 2018, pp. 6–11.
127 Quillette, Quillette Podcast 33—Professor Nigel Biggar on Academic Outrage Mobs, What Motivates Them and How to Fight Back, 15 May 2019, https://quillette.com/2019/05/15/quillette-podcast-33-professor-nigel-biggar-on-academic outrage-mobs-what-motivates-them-and-how-to-fight-back/ (last accessed 20 April 2020).
128 The Telegraph, 23 February 2019.
129 See Standpoint, 18 September 2019.
against Nigel Biggar’s ‘thoughtful’ pursuit of an imperial balance sheet and to thus elevate to the very embodiment of critique of empire. Born in India and trained in South-Asian literature at Cornell University in the US, Gopal moved to Cambridge in 2001. Her first public intervention about empire occurred in 2006, as she was contacted by the BBC Radio 4 team and invited to debate Niall Ferguson and Linda Colley on the programme Start of the Week. After an acrimonious exchange with Ferguson on the radio, Gopal then wrote a piece for the Guardian about how ‘Neocon ideologues are being given free rein by the media to rewrite the history of Britain’s empire and whitewash its crimes’. Gopal would later return to sporadically write for the Guardian about race in Britain or developments in India, but as she would later recall, ‘there was no kind of systematised or planned engagement’. She did, however, experience the early debate about empire as a contradictory one. On the one hand, she noticed the silences in the public sphere and the lack of acknowledgement of empire. On the other hand, she experienced such a degree of vitriol after every intervention about imperial history that she came to perceive debating empire as poking a hornet’s nest.

In 2017, the Telegraph identified Gopal as the teacher behind the Cambridge student call for decolonisation (See Chap. 9), singling out two women of colour—together with the student Lola Olufemi—as the leaders responsible for decolonisation initiatives that the newspaper branded as hostile to ‘free-speech’. In December 2017, Nigel Biggar personally focused his ire on Gopal, as she became one of the organisers of another open letter condemning Biggar’s project ‘Ethics and Empire’. This letter, signed by 170 international scholars, complemented the first Oxford-based open letter and called upon Oxford University to explain the project’s support and sources of funding. While the letter had several organisers, Biggar personally identified Gopal as the main culprit. In his account of the ‘hostility’ he was subjected to, he traced the root of

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130 BBC Radio 4, Start of the Week, 12 June 2006. See also Interview Priyamvada Gopal with author, 2 August 2018.
131 The Guardian, 28 June 2006.
132 Interview Priyamvada Gopal with author, 2018.
133 Daily Telegraph, 24 October 2017.
134 Medium, A Collective statement on ‘Ethics and Empire’, 21 December 2017, https://medium.com/oxfordempireletter/a-collective-statement-on-ethics-and-empire-19c2477871a0 (last accessed: 20 April 2020).
contemptuous and abusive’ silencing of his opinions to one of Gopal’s
tweets.135 ‘OMG, this [Ethics and Empire] is serious shit. Darwin is an
old imperial apologist of a sophisticated sort, of course, We need to
SHUT THIS DOWN.’136 Interestingly, Gopal’s immediate reaction only
referred to John Darwin, the historian who initiated the project together
with Nigel Biggar and quickly stepped down after the first wave of con-
troversy. Her only reaction to Biggar was in a subtweet, replying to the
historian of empire Kim Wagner and asking: ‘Who is he? I’ve never heard
of him’.137 However, when Biggar later retold the story, he omitted the
part that focused on Darwin and insisted Gopal had instead targeted him
personally. Biggar then turned directly to Cambridge University’s
Churchill College to demand Gopal’s dismissal,138 and in April accused
Gopal of orchestrating a campaign of ‘spitting hatred’ in a Times article
titled ‘Vile abuse is now tolerated in our universities’.139 A few days later,
the Daily Mail published a two-page special about universities with spe-
cial focus on Priyamvada Gopal. One commentary by Stephen Glover
referred to her as a part of a ‘left-wing fifth column’, while another piece
claimed to be an investigation into the headline ‘How CAN Cambridge
let this hate-filled don pour out her racist bile?’ under a picture of Gopal
and her cat.140

As the Daily Mail publication triggered waves of abuse targeted at
Priyamvada Gopal,141 its racist overtones also rallied student organisations
and left-wing Internet publications around Gopal.142 This dynamic
reflected the new popularity of the imperial balance sheet, which contrib-
uted to the production of continuous outrage in the tabloid press and on
social media alike. While previous episodes were short lived and never
amounted to a large-scale public debate, the presence of Biggar and Gopal
on the media went hand in hand with a dynamic of polarised outrage that

135 Biggar, Nigel, “Ethics & Empire” and Free Speech—some home truths’, in: Oxford
Magazine, 6 Noughth Week, Hilary Term, 10 January 2018.
136 Twitter, Priyamvada Gopal (@PriyamvadaGopal), 4:45 pm, 13 December 2017.
137 Twitter, Priyamvada Gopal (@PriyamvadaGopal), 8:47 pm, 13 December 2017.
138 Interview Priyamvada Gopal with author, 2018.
139 The Times, 10 April 2018.
140 Daily Mail, 12 April 2018.
141 Gopal received many emails, but also over a dozen handwritten letters with threats. See
Interview Priyamvada Gopal with author, 2018.
142 See, for example, Cambridge University Student Union’s Women’s Campaign’s call to
support Priyamvada Gopal Twitter, CUSU Women’s Campaign (@CUSUwomen), 3:28 pm,
12 April 2018.
characterised the public conversation after the Brexit referendum. Just as Niall Ferguson before him, Biggar brandished his balance-sheet approach as not only a matter of ‘common sense’, but also a part of a wider, international conversation that was raging in North America. Unlike Ferguson, however, who attached his flamboyant visibility to George W. Bush’s unpopular neoconservative interventionism, Biggar claimed to have no political stake in the debate beyond his supposed commitment to free-speech. He used an ever-growing public platform—whether in the Times or online publications—to establish a narrative according to which acknowledging that empire had positive effects was a contribution to a broader struggle for free speech against an ‘establishment’. In common appearances together with the likes of Jordan Peterson or Douglas Murray, Biggar highlighted the role of the ‘balance sheet’ as the academic British component in an international debate that was conducted online: on forums, blogs and social networks.143 Biggar’s claims that he was ‘victimised’ into silence by the supposed hegemony of left-wing academics thus mirrored the Leave Campaign’s claims to represent those ‘left behind’ against an establishment through the democratising power of social networks. Similarly, Biggar’s focus on Gopal—who at the beginning of their confrontation had only a limited public platform through social media or occasional contribution to the Guardian—followed the same logic. Beyond the racialised and gendered choice of opponent, Biggar did not complain about Gopal’s institutional reach, but her Twitter presence.144 However, through the conflict with Biggar, Gopal’s social media reach grew exponentially. From less than 4000 followers in September 2017,

143 For Nigel Biggar’s defence of Jordan Peterson see Biggar’s article ‘Cambridge and the Exclusion of Jordan Peterson’ in The Article, 12 April 2019: https://www.thearticle.com/cambridge-and-the-exclusion-of-jordan-peterson (accessed 20 April 2020) and for Biggar’s joint appearance with Douglas Murray, see the transcript of the event Henry Jackson Society, ‘Professor Nigel Biggar in Conversation with Douglas Murray’, 20 June 2018: https://henryjacksonsociety.org/members-content/professor-nigel-biggar-in-conversation-with-douglas-murray/ (accessed 20 April 2020). Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychologist and Professor at the University of Toronto, and Douglas Murray, a Conservative commentator, both became notorious on the so-called Intellectual Dark Web for their harnessing of the free-speech argument to attack the anti-racist left, feminism, and ‘wokeness’. See, for example, Sultana, Farhana, ‘The False Equivalence of Academic Freedom and Free Speech’, in: ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies, vol. 17, no 2, 2018, pp. 228–57.
144 See Interview Priyamvada Gopal with author, 2018. For accounts of Biggar’s institutional rivalries, see Drayton, Richard, ‘Biggar vs Little Britain’, in: Rasch and Ward, 2019, pp. 143–56.
she had nearly 21,000 by July 2018. By 2020, the number of her followers trebled to over 65,000.\textsuperscript{145} Far from a passive actor, Priyamvada Gopal crafted her own public persona as a voice of resistance to ‘misty eyed’ right-wing apologists of empire,\textsuperscript{146} who proved ready to challenge established media academics for racist transgressions.\textsuperscript{147} While many of her interventions focused on unveiling racism in Britain, others, liked the article ‘Britain’s story of empire is based on myth. We need to know the truth’ called upon breaking the silences around empire.\textsuperscript{148} Just like Afua Hirsch or Reni Eddo-Lodge, Gopal perceived the need to come to terms with empire mainly through the lens of race and the necessity to confront empire’s legacies of racism. Here, she identified the abuse she suffered with her open addressing of race, as she recalled:

I think the worst of it began when I [...] brought race into the debate. [...] if you bring in the ways in which imperial legacies have racial legacies that affect present-day interactions, that is when there is cause for fury. And it’s kind of curious. There is an insistence that we need to bring back and celebrate empire, and runs along that an insistence that we are somehow post-racial. And you can’t have both. You can’t bring back the empire and say: but race is not an issue anymore. I think there is a real refusal to recognise that empire was a racialised formation.\textsuperscript{149}

However, she did not approach the history of empire to reclaim racialised Britons’ story of belonging. Gopal was far more interested in the power relations that shaped British society as a whole, and in particular in the salience of whiteness as a category. To challenge whiteness as a structural category, Gopal’s project aimed at telling a collective British story, which places resistance to empire—and the state repression it attracted—in the heart of Britain’s narrative. The book she published in 2019, \textit{Insurgent Empire}, therefore celebrated resistance as a category that best represented a ‘global Britain’ through a historical perspective, but also as

\textsuperscript{145} \textit{Twitter}, Priyamvada Gopal (@PriyamvadaGopal), accessed 16 September 2017, 6 July 2018 and 20 April 2020.

\textsuperscript{146} See, for example, the \textit{Guardian}, 28 July 2017.

\textsuperscript{147} See, for example, Gopal, Priyamvada, ‘Response to Mary Beard’, in: \textit{Medium}, 18 February 2018, https://medium.com/@zen.catgirl/response-to-mary-beard-91a6cf2f53b6 (last accessed 20 April 2020).

\textsuperscript{148} The \textit{Guardian}, 6 July 2019.

\textsuperscript{149} Interview Priyamvada Gopal with author, 2018.
a corrective to the Brexit narrative. Gopal’s resistance was, however, mainly epistemological and centred around academic knowledge production. While she addressed national narratives about empire and whiteness, she did not use any vocabulary of memory, as acts of memorialisation inevitably accepted the structures of the capitalist state rather than challenged it.

Gopal vocally rejected Biggar’s balance-sheet approach for the sake of a vision of radical decolonisation that would unite academic critique of capitalism with resistance to myths of empire. However, the balance-sheet idea heavily informed a growing number of initiatives that identified resistance to the notion of the positive role of empire as a new marker of progressive politics. These included initiatives that focused on reclaiming museum space like the ‘Uncomfortable Art’ museum tours, led by the independent guide Alice Procter to ‘resist triumphalist nostalgia within art history’, but also online initiatives like the blog and Twitter profile with over 100,000 followers ‘Crimes of Britain’, which aims at ‘monitoring British imperialism of the present day and revisiting it of the past’. Notwithstanding, the most telling of these initiatives was an inclusion of a pledge to ‘Conduct an audit of the impact of Britain’s colonial legacy to understand our contribution to the dynamics of violence and insecurity across regions previously under British colonial rule’ into the Labour Party Manifesto going into the 2019 elections. As a part of a manifesto that was later remembered for the plethora of promises it made, the pledge received little attention beyond an expected short comment Daily Mail and a passing mocking remark in the Telegraph in an article that otherwise listed all the components of Labour’s ‘Marxist agenda’. The decision to call it an ‘audit’, however, reflected the understanding of the politicisation of history as a tribunal, in which governments are called to assess the positives and negatives of the country’s historical record.

Gopal, Priyamvada, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019).

Donington, Katie, Relics of Empire? Colonialism and the Culture Wars, in: Rasch and Ward, 2019, pp. 126–7.

See https://crimesofbritain.com/ (accessed 20 April 2020), but also Twitter, Crimes of Britain (@crimesofbrits), 20 April 2020.

The Labour Party, *Manifesto* (London: Labour Party, 2019), online on: https://labour.org.uk/manifesto-2019/a-new-internationalism/ (accessed on 21 April 2020).

Daily Mail, 21 November 2018 and the Telegraph, 21 November 2019.
**Epiologue: When Statues Fall**

On 7 June 2020, all strands of the British empire debate came together as protesters toppled the long-contested statue of Edward Colston in Bristol. They daubed the statue in red paint, attached a rope to it, pulled it down, rolled it over the street and finally pushed it into Bristol Harbour. From a local controversy that had for many years involved local activists, academics, the council and the intransigent Society of Merchants Venturers, the images from Bristol put Colston’s statue, and with it the commemoration of empire, on the national stage. Just as with other British protests, this one was a part of a wave of international protests, borrowing its dynamic and much of its vocabulary from the US. The protest in Bristol was one of many events in the UK that were sparked by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the US. Their most recent wave, which quickly spread through the US and beyond, was re-ignited after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minnesota. As protesters in Bristol mainly used American references to George Floyd, with his last words ‘I can’t breathe’ featuring on placards and in chants, the group made the connection between the global BLM protests and its American focus on removal of Confederate statues and the local presence of Colston’s statue.

The momentum of these protests, together with the anxious atmosphere after two months of national lockdown due to the international coronavirus crisis, coalesced into a snowball effect. On 9 June, the London council of Tower Hamlets removed the statue of the slave trader Robert Milligan from his plinth in London’s docklands. On that same day, thousands of protesters gathered in front of Oriel College in Oxford to demand, yet again, the removal of the Rhodes statue. On 17 June, following an open letter to the *Telegraph* by 14 Oxford professors calling for the removal of

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155 The *Guardian*, 8 June 2020.
156 See Chap. 8, but also the *Bristol Post*, 10 June 2020 on the never-ending attempts to find a compromise over the contextualisation of the statue. While activists and academics suggested different wordings for a plaque that would explicitly refer to Colston’s involvement in the enslavement of Africans rather than just his philanthropic activities, these would be blocked the Society of Merchants Venturers.
157 See, for example, *Guardian* (online), ‘George Floyd protests give fresh impetus to UK anti-racism campaign’, 6 June 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/06/george-floyd-protests-uk-anti-racism-campaign (accessed 20 July 2020).
158 The *Independent*, 9 June 2020.
159 The *New Statesman*, 11 June 2020.
the Rhodes statue, the Oriel College governing body voted in favour of the statue’s removal. Together with the defacing of Winston Churchill’s statue in London with graffiti stating the man ‘was a racist’, the visible and successful protests to topple statues brought empire to the public debate on an unprecedented scale and for a few months at least, it seemed like it was there to stay.

The discussion over the removal of statues united different strands of previous debates—about race, resistance and the inevitable ‘balance sheet’—into one perfect storm. Arguments in favour of toppling of statues used the vocabulary of structural racism, which the BLM movements popularised beyond the core of anti-racist activists, to ‘topple the racists’. For example, to announce the creation of a ‘Topple the Racists’ online map that identified 78 problematic monuments in the UK, the founding Stop Trump Coalition declared: ‘Glorifying colonialists and slavers has no place in a country serious about dismantling systemic racism and oppression, but education does’. Toppling statues was therefore twofold. On the one hand, it reflected commitment to traditional anti-racist ideals, as it demonstrated the public space had no space for the glorification of a racist past. On the other, it was a part of the concept of anti-racist education discussed in Chap. 9, which made sense in a moment when thousands of accounts on social media—from Instagram to Facebook—shared anti-racist reading lists for the sake of becoming better anti-racist supporters and allies.

Simultaneously, just as activists and academics expressed their support for toppling statues, they did so with arguments that demonstrated unease with focusing on statues rather than ‘wider issues’ of racism. ‘Rhodes Must Fall is about more than just a statue’, as the Oxford-based activist and PhD student Neha Shah wrote for Tribune magazine and later quoted in the London Review of Books and other publications, thus became the main justification for toppling statues. Monuments were therefore

160 See the Telegraph, 17 June 2020 and 18 June 2020.
161 Evening Standard, 7 June 2020.
162 Stop Trump Coalition, ‘Topple the Racists’, press release, 10 June 2020: https://www.stoptrump.org.uk/topple-the-racists/ (last accessed 10 July 2020).
163 See, for example, the critique of ‘focus too narrowly on the fate of the statue’ in the New Statesman, 11 June 2020.
164 Shah, Neha, ‘What Rhodes Must Fall Really Means’, in: Tribune, 19 June 2020: https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/06/what-rhodes-must-fall-really-means (accessed 22 July 2020).
symbols used to amplify concerns about racism, and their removal was the result of a process of popular resistance.

While the momentum sided with the protests, reactions to the toppling of the Colston statue—and to the inclusion of Churchill into the conversation about representations of empire in the public spaces—revealed and highlighted the binaries of British public opinion. Criticism of the protesters focused at first mainly on the ‘unlawfulness’ of the action, thus creating a parallel narrative of disregard for law and order that was set against activists’ focus on ‘resistance’. In the same vein, a second strand of criticism identified the activists’ supposed ‘intolerance’ in actions that ‘erased’ history. As a reply, historians like David Olusoga and Olivette Otele answered with opinion articles claiming the removal of statues was history in the making—through popular act of rejection of racist legacies—rather than the erasure of history. While public opinion was not in fact as polarised on the issue, with polls finding majorities for those in favour of the statue’s removal with many ‘don’t knows’, the framing of the empire debate as incorrigibly polarised only strengthened the balance-sheet approach. The Daily Mail Online’s article with the long headline ‘Racists or heroes? It’s not black or white: Black Lives Matter want to topple statues of some of the most famous Britons because of their links to colonialism and slavery—but they also gave fortunes away, and helped build Britain and a modern world’ embodied this attitude. The article presented a list of threatened statues with a list of ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’ for each man’s record. In fact, keeping the balance was the sole explicit goal of the article, claiming that ‘Among [these historical figures] are leaders who held undeniably racist views and others who performed evil acts against people of colour, […] But others also played a leading role shaping the cities and institutions that form modern day Britain.’ Interestingly, the point with

165 See, for example, the Home Secretary Priti Patel’s condemnation of protesters as ‘thugs and criminals’ on the Guardian (online), 12 June 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2020/jun/08/uk-coronavirus-johnson-says-anti-racist-protests-were-subverted-by-thuggery-live-news-covid19-updates (accessed 22 July 2020).
166 See Olusoga’s ‘The toppling of Edward Colston’s statue is not an attack on history. It is history’ in: the Guardian, 8 June 2020 and Otele’s ‘These anti-racism protests show it’s time for Britain to grapple with its difficult history’ in the Guardian, 8 June 2020.
167 See, for example: YouGov, ‘Do You Approve or Disapprove of Protesters in Bristol Pulling Down the Statue of Edward Colston?’, 8 June 2020: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/survey-results/daily/2020/06/08/1ab21/1 (accessed 22 July 2020).
168 Daily Mail (online), 9 June 2020: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8401857/Racists-heroes-Black-Lives-Matter-want-topple-statues-famous-Britons-
the balance sheet here was to discern between the ‘racists’ and the formation of modern-day Britain, as if the two concepts had been diametrically opposed to one another.

Unlike previous flaring of empire controversies, the BLM outbreak remained in the headlines for weeks with new commentaries published daily on a broad range of media. On 22 July, over six weeks after the toppling of Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol, empire—and particularly the imperial balance sheet—became the subject of one of BBC Radio 4’s flagship programmes, Moral Maze. The programme’s format facilitated a balance-sheet debate from the start: every programme unites four jury members from the media to interview four experts about a topic that is otherwise broadly acknowledged as morally tricky and divisive. At the end, the jury reaches a conclusion based on the experts’ debating skills. No historians contributed to the episode on ‘The Morality of the British Empire’, but the jury and experts represented diversity of opinion, gender and ethnicity. The jury was composed of the likes of the left-wing Sudanese-born Guardian columnist Nesrine Malik, the interfaith scholar Mona Siddiqui of Pakistani origin, or the anti-woke white satirist Andrew Doyle, while the ‘experts’ included the legal scholar Nadine El-Enany, the inevitable Nigel Biggar, the geographer Alan Lester and the journalist Janan Ganesh. Even though the production team had promised El-Enany the programme would not focus on the imperial balance sheet, the presenter, Michael Buerk, framed the debate as a choice between ‘should be ashamed or proud of our past?’. Every expert was thus explicitly asked about the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects of empire. In her answer, El-Enany began by pointing to how the question was ‘a very flawed question to be asking’ and was instantly interrupted with the demand to find ‘a single positive thing’ about the empire. As she replied, she further rejected the balance-sheet approach and insisted that the only thing that interested her was ‘how to make good on historical wrongs’ in the present. As such, however, and much through her combative style, she was caricaturised by the jury as a left-winger who was uninterested in historical truths and ready to shut down a conversation. In much the same way, however, the jury lambasted Nigel Biggar’s well-rehearsed approximations about the need to feel ‘pride’ over empire’s achievements as arrogance delivered

slavery-links.html (accessed 22 July 2020).

169 BBC Radio 4, Moral Maze, 22 July 2020.
170 Twitter, Nadine El-Enany (@NadineElEnany), 08:15 am, 23 July 2020.
with a patrician style. For a programme designed to emulate debating
societies, style was of the essence, but so were clear positionings along the
‘good’ and ‘bad’ lines.

Beyond the repetitiveness of the balance-sheet attitude, however, Moral
Maze illustrated two main characteristics of the empire debate after
Colston. Firstly, after years in which different actors addressed British
ignorance over empire, the main—and possibly only—point of agreement
between all participants was the need for education. Different participants
interpreted the meaning of education differently, but all delved into their
own experiences from the British education system to see they had not
learnt of the empire themselves. Simultaneously, none went further than
saying it would be important to learn more about the empire. In the same
way as throughout any debates about empire, participants called for more
attention to empire at schools, but without any acknowledgements that
Britain’s history curriculum was nearly inexistent and did go beyond Key
Stage 3, or the age of 13. Teaching school history in Britain, therefore,
would require the kind of attention to systemic details otherwise absent
from the public debate. Secondly, within the debate over the negatives and
positives of empire, participants were unable to articulate a vision of what
to do with knowledge of empire. Andrew Doyle repeated several times he
rejected ‘shame’, but beyond the binaries of ‘pride’ and ‘shame’, partici-
pants did not have any words to describe the use of history. Even El-Enany,
who focused on the need for reparations, did not speak about the necessity
of understanding history for its own sake. This stood in stark contrast to
France, where memory vocabulary provided a blueprint to the way history
matters in the public sphere. Memory was therefore a long-term public
project that involved many actors. In Britain, having no name for memory
and pretending history was a free-floating thing meant it could be dis-
cussed in an atmosphere of conflict, but was otherwise secondary to other
projects.

Ultimately, the explosion of the empire debate after the BLM protests
and its subsequent derailment into the balance-sheet debate was the high-
point of a process traced by this chapter. It involved historians who tried
to make empire matter to the British public with some successes, but as
David Anderson observed frustratingly, with little to no long-term pierc-
ing of the public silence over empire.\footnote{Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015.} A curious element in this process
was the belief shared by all actors, whether Niall Ferguson, David Anderson

171 Interview David Anderson with author, 16 October 2015.
or Priyamvada Gopal, that empire was an emotive issue for the British public, yet not emotive enough to be harnessed into a sustainable debate that involved British society as a whole. The Mau Mau episode was particularly interesting, as David Anderson used every contact he had in the press to raise awareness of the importance of imperial history for the British national understanding. Yet he remained unsuccessful, while Caroline Elkins’ simplistically moral narrative, which inflated numbers to ‘upgrade’ the Mau Mau conflict into a true atrocity in the public eye, gained a far greater public hearing. These clear moral stances then became ever more popular in the post-referendum atmosphere of polarised conflict. As debates about race and Blackness grew in Britain’s Black communities and addressed the importance of empire for Black Britons, the balance-sheet approach was the only other existing way to talk about empire that was available for white Britain.