

Wm. Roger Louis
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History and Culture
University of Texas at
Austin
President
2001



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Wm. Roger Louis, who holds the positions of Kerr Chair of English History and Culture and Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Texas at Austin, is a historian whose passion for his subject, commitment to research, and dedication to teaching are legendary. His research interests have led him for more than forty years to the Public Record Office in London to mine the official records on European colonization in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. His impressive publication record includes two dozen books written or edited by him. They are all innovative treatments of important subjects. That Roger Louis is a widely read and learned historian is evident in the questions he poses, the answers he offers, and the arguments he presents, as well as the elegance of his prose and the sophistication of his style. As a testimony to his academic writing and leadership, his colleagues organized a *festschrift* for him well before he reached retirement age. This was published in 1999 as *The Statecraft of British Imperialism: Essays in Honor of Wm. Roger Louis*, which places his scholarship in a much larger context than is possible for me to do in this short piece.

Louis was born in Detroit, on May 8, 1936, but grew up in Oklahoma, the home state of his parents, Henry Edward and Bena May Louis. His parents fulfilled one of their goals in life by ensuring that he and his sister, Carolyn, received an excellent education. At home his awareness of the issues of racial segregation in Oklahoma City in the 1950s led to a long-standing interest in civil rights. Before graduating from high school, he participated in a YMCA camp in France. It was his first time in Europe, and the opportunity to meet people from different countries made a lasting impression on him. He pursued a broad range of interests as a high school student in the early 1950s. His favorite subject was literature. He played the French horn, was active on the school's swimming team and the YMCA gymnastics team, and was also a handball champion. In 1954 he received the graduating senior music award, and as an undergraduate at the University of Oklahoma he was an active member of the university symphony orchestra.

At the University of Oklahoma he majored in the Letters Honors Program in history, philosophy, and literature. As a college sophomore in 1955–56 he studied in Freiburg, Germany, and at the Sorbonne in Paris, becoming fluent in both German and French. Eager to know as much of the world as possible, he traveled—hitchhiked—on his own to the eastern Mediterranean. There he witnessed one of the most momentous events of the twentieth century: the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser on July 26, 1956. This and other experiences

such as travel in Algeria and Morocco brought him face-to-face with the reality of anticolonial and anti-American sentiment in a colonial world.

It must have been obvious to anyone who knew Roger Louis in the mid-1950s that his horizons would extend far beyond Oklahoma. In 1959 he won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to Harvard, where he developed a keen interest in nationalism in Africa and Asia, thanks to courses offered by Rupert Emerson, and in other areas through courses taught by Barrington Moore and Ernest May. He received an M.A. in history in 1960, and then went to St. Antony's College, Oxford, for doctoral work supervised by famous historian A.J.P. Taylor. Louis obtained the doctorate in two years. He attended seminars on the history of the British Empire and colonial nationalism organized by notable historians such as Margery Perham. Oxford laid the foundations for his effort to reconstruct and interpret British colonial history. Like his supervisor, Louis believes that the main role of the historian is to understand the past, but that the historian should also interpret contemporary world affairs.

His doctoral dissertation set out to compare Belgian, British, and German colonialism in Africa. He had the good fortune to share in the discovery of new sources, sources never before used by a historian, namely the German district records in the northwest of (former) German East Africa, and to be among the historians of the 1960s who contributed to our knowledge of colonial Africa. His D.Phil. thesis was published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1963 as *Ruanda-Urundi, 1884-1919*. It is a novel and penetrating study on the comparison of German administration in Ruanda (as it was then known) with that of the British in Uganda's province of Kigali. This was his first book to focus on European expansion in Africa, a theme that would later lead to the study of European disengagement. His trajectory as a historian is revealed in this book. He has an astute eye for detail, he presents clear logic and elegant prose, and he assembles a large body of data and checks sources closely before reaching conclusions. *Ruanda-Urundi* set the pattern for his later work. He places regional and national studies in a broad historical and comparative framework and he avoids extravagant generalizations. His publications continue to emphasize the theme of European expansion and disengagement, each new one elaborating on fresh subjects, and each based on archival evidence.

Roger Louis's works in the 1960s concentrated on British imperialism in Africa. During this time he also established his reputation as a historian pursuing the nature and end of European colonial rule in the twentieth century. A book written with Jean Stengers helped to extend Louis's scope to the Congo, more specifically to the Congo Reform Association, an organization that spearheaded international opposition to the excesses of King Leopold II in what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The British conquest of Africa received attention

in a major essay on Sir Percy Anderson published by the *English Historical Review* in 1966. Louis also explored the rivalry and clashes generated by the scramble for Africa between Britain and Germany in a book jointly edited with Prosser Gifford, *Britain and Germany in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule*, published by Yale University Press in 1967. The tension between France and Britain was highlighted in another book co-edited with Gifford, which appeared in 1971. African resistance to imperialism is featured in these studies, both of which contain many pioneering essays and still provide the best comparative studies of the British and German and British and French administrations in Africa. In 1967, he published an important book on German imperialism in Africa and the Pacific. Entitled *Great Britain and Germany's Lost Colonies, 1914-1919* (Clarendon, Oxford), it explains the consequences of the seizure of the German colonies by the Allied Powers and Japan. His scholarship on the European empires in Africa recognizes the significance of local events in the shaping of international history. All of these works were written at Yale, then perhaps the leading history department in the country, where he was an assistant and associate professor from 1962 to 1970.

In 1970 Louis moved to Austin as a full professor at the University of Texas. He has subsequently been awarded many honors. Among these are the Kerr Chair, which he has held since 1985; the directorship of the British studies program since 1975; the Distinguished Graduate Teaching Award (1984); the Student Council Outstanding Teaching Award (1992); the President's Award for Outstanding Teaching (1993); the Outstanding Graduate Teaching Award (1998); and, in the same year, membership in the University of Texas Distinguished Teaching Academy. Other honors have been conferred on him from beyond the University of Texas, among them a D.Litt. from Oxford in 1979. He was honored in Britain with elections in 1984 to the Royal Historical Society, and in 1993 to the British Academy. More recently the Queen appointed him Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in recognition of his historical work.

In 1974-75 he received a senior fellowship of the National Endowment for the Humanities, followed four years later by a Guggenheim Fellowship, when he was also a visiting fellow at All Souls College in Oxford. In 1985 he served as the overseas fellow, Churchill College, Cambridge. For twelve years, 1984-96, he was a supernumerary fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford. He was a visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution in 1989, a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center in 1994-95, and honorary fellow of St. Antony's College from 1996 to the present.

Roger Louis has given prestigious lectures in many universities. Since space does not permit a complete listing of these, I will mention a select few. He gave the Chichele lectures at All Souls College, Oxford, in 1991, on Leopold Amery, who was British secretary of state for the colonies in

the 1920s and secretary of state for India during the Second World War. The lectures were subsequently published by W. W. Norton in 1992 as *In the Name of God, Go! Leo Amery and the British Empire in the Age of Churchill*. This captivating and intimate account portrays Amery as less reactionary than previously believed, and much more willing to see India gain independence. There were also the Distinguished Lectures in 1992 at the London School of Economics on "Eden and Suez," the Cust Memorial Lecture at Nottingham University in 1995 on "The Dissolution of the British Empire," the British Academy Elie Kedourie Memorial Lecture in 1996 on "Harold Macmillan and the Middle East Crisis of 1958," and the 1998 Kemperer Churchill Memorial Lecture.

His work covers some five interrelated areas, and while some of my colleagues will probably disagree with my categorization, this disagreement only emphasizes the depth and breadth of his scholarship. The first area is historiographical—an attempt to discuss major historical debates and evaluate their overall impact. One of his books in this area is on the scholarship of his Oxford supervisor, A.J.P. Taylor, on the role of Adolf Hitler in the Second World War. In an edited book published in 1972, *The Origins of the Second World War: A.J.P. Taylor and His Critics*, Louis participated in a debate that is still contentious. Another book is the intellectually bracing collection entitled *Imperialism: The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (1976). This volume reviews the arguments about the process and origins of British imperial conquest. As an arbiter in such central issues, his judgments have been accepted by many historians. His most recent historiographical work is the introductory chapter in volume five of the *Oxford History of the British Empire: Historiography*, which surveys the historical interpretation of the British Empire from one generation of historians to the next, from the nineteenth century to the 1960s.

The second category continues the study of Africa that he undertook in the 1960s: the dismantling of the European empires during the twentieth century. Again with Prosser Gifford, he co-edited *The Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonization, 1940–1960*, published by Yale University Press in 1982, and a follow-up volume in 1988, also from Yale, *Decolonization and African Independence: The Transfers of Power, 1960–1980*. Both are groundbreaking works that reconstruct the history of European disengagement after the Second World War. A clear pattern emerges in these two books and others by Louis that identifies the causes of the end of colonialism not only in terms of insurgency in the colonies and the weakness of the European powers, but also the shifting political circumstances of the Cold War era dominated by the United States.

The third body of work is on the role of the United States in world politics during the twentieth century. Roger Louis successfully established that the United States, although not a traditional imperialist

power, was deeply involved in many of the leading colonial issues of the last century. His celebrated book, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941–1945* (Oxford University Press, 1977), covers the great changes during the Second World War. It yields conclusions that no serious scholar of decolonization can ignore. The book exposes the rivalry and suspicion between Britain and the United States, and the politics of the creation of the United Nations trusteeship system. In many articles that examine imperialism more broadly, the anticolonial role of the United States is discussed in the context of the Cold War and the end of the European empires.

The fourth set of Louis's works is on the Middle East, which occupies a prominent place in "informal" or indirect European expansion. Roger Louis has contributed, perhaps more than anybody else, to our understanding of the Anglo-American aims and politics in this region. While elaborating on the expansion of European powers, he successfully explored the impact of the four crucial revolutionary crises that altered the balance of power and reconfigured the imperial relationship: the partition of Palestine in 1948, the nationalization of Iranian oil in 1951, the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, and the Iraqi revolution of 1958. A book co-edited with Robert Stookey, *The End of the Palestine Mandate* (University of Texas Press, 1986), treats a significant issue of our time, and one that remains basic to the understanding of Arab-Israeli relations in the modern world. Another aspect of the politics of the Middle East surrounded the Suez Canal, an issue that is the subject of a well-received collection, *Suez 1956: The Crisis and Its Consequences* (Oxford University Press, 1989). The co-edited books *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism, and Oil* (University of Texas Press, 1988) and *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited* (I. B. Tauris, 1991) offer profound insights on Iranian and Arab nationalism and the revolutionary leadership. In *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford University Press, 1984), Louis offers an elaborate treatment of the interaction between British and American imperialism and Middle Eastern nationalism. The book won the George Louis Beer Prize of the American Historical Association, and has now become a classic in understanding the ambiguities of imperialism and nationalism in the Middle East.

The final category is the larger theme of imperialism, which unites all the previous ones in an extraordinary and creative picture that covers four centuries, and has made Louis a leading historian in the field. To him, the expansion of the British Empire is at the center of an elaborate discussion of imperialism in all its ramifications. For many, he is best known for his influential and powerful studies on the end of European rule. From books on Africa and Asia to works on Australia and the Dominions, he has provided a coherence that gives unity to imperial

history. Since 1988 he has helped to edit a set of primary sources, *British Documents on the End of Empire*, the sheer scope of which makes it indispensable for research. Last but not least, with Lord (Robert) Blake he convened a conference that led to the publication in 1993 of one of the major works reassessing the life and career of Churchill.

A high point of his lifelong study of British imperialism was his appointment as editor-in-chief of the Oxford History of the British Empire in 1992, which led to the publication in 1998 and 1999 of five influential and celebrated volumes with chapters by some 125 prominent historians. There is a volume for each century, while the last volume is devoted to the historiography of the Empire. These volumes combine area studies with British imperial history, and they will stand for generations as a work of reference as well as interpretation.

I have detailed Louis's principal publications here, but space constraints forbid describing the more than fifty essays that have appeared in virtually all the leading journals of modern history. Each says something new that is presented in a sophisticated but readable manner, and more than a few have attained the status of classics. Roger Louis has played the leading role in defining the British Empire, analyzing the forces that instigated imperial expansion, evaluating its consequences, providing the grand narratives on the end of the empire after World War II, chronicling the phases and impact of the rise of American global hegemony, and bringing together disparate developments in area studies with those of imperialism.

Louis enjoys, perhaps more than anything else, discussing ideas and new findings with students and colleagues. I have indicated that his teaching record is extraordinary, not simply because of his superb knowledge and intellectual range, but also because of his empathy for others, warmth, unpretentiousness, openness to fresh ideas, and his strong belief in the need to understand the past, as well as his ability to merge research and teaching in creative ways. Students not only learn from his rich experiences, but also come to value his self-discipline and rigor. He is ever generous with his time to graduate students, and they appreciate his thorough supervision, exacting work, efficiency, and his ability to pose the right questions, while his ideas also animate them to think about topics on the cutting edge. His boundless energy and intellectual curiosity draw students, colleagues, and friends to him.

He has extended his commitments and skills to bring junior history faculty to the University of Texas. He is willing to listen to new ideas that conflict with his own. He has served as director of National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars in 1989, 1991, 1992, 1995, and 2000. His weekly seminar on British studies is an institution, renowned in literary as well as historical circles. He has been director of British studies for over a quarter of a century. More than six hundred speakers have

lectured on historical, literary, and political topics. Some of the lectures have been published in *Adventures with Britannia* (University of Texas Press, 1995) and *More Adventures with Britannia* (University of Texas Press, 1998). *Still More Adventures with Britannia* is in press, and, yes, a further volume will be entitled *Yet More Adventures with Britannia*.

His far-ranging contributions to the discipline might suggest that Roger Louis has no time for anything but research and writing. Nothing could be further from the truth. He has always had time for family and friends, and has never seen his personal and academic lives as mutually exclusive. Indeed, the intersection of the two has often been intellectually productive, especially with his children, Antony Andrew and Catherine Ann. And no description of Louis would be complete without mentioning the joy of his life, his wife, Dagmar Cecilia Friedrich, whom he married in 1981.

"Wisdom," declares an African proverb, "is not like gold which should be kept in a safe." All historians should be grateful that Roger Louis has not hidden his prodigious talents and wisdom in a locked box.

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