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Running the Show: Governors of the British Empire

By Stephanie Williams

Reviewed by [Amanda Foreman](#) - 05 May 2011

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The hidden history of the British empire.

Crimes and misdemeanours

Sometimes the publication of a book coincides so perfectly with a national event that the author becomes an instant celebrity and achieves a sort of guru status: Niall Ferguson with *The Ascent of Money*, for instance. Unfortunately, from time to time, the reverse also happens, and a book is thoroughly overshadowed by unexpected events or revelations.

Stephanie Williams could not have known that the case of five elderly Kenyan litigants against the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) would reach the high court at the precise moment that her book was published. How that knowledge might have shaped *Running the Show* can only be a matter of conjecture. But regardless of the timing, it is simply impossible to read Williams's account of 16 British governors who ruled various colonies between 1857 and 1912 without comparing her treatment of the subject to the outcome of colonial rule half a century later.

The high court case hinges on the recent discovery of 300 boxes of documents in the Foreign Office archives that detail the government's involvement in the repression of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. The evidence seen so far makes for appalling reading: not only were prisoners routinely starved and tortured to death, but the colonial authorities knew about the abuse and even tried to cover it up: "If we are going to sin, we must sin quietly," wrote Eric Griffiths-Jones, attorney general of Kenya. The FCO's argument is not that abuses never happened but that the government cannot be held liable for them. (Successive governments have used the same legal ruse - that everything pertaining to the old colonial government passed to the new governments at the time of independence - to defraud hundreds of colonial civil servants of their rightful pension.)

Although the court case has nothing to do with the causes of the Mau Mau rebellion, the injustices that drove the Kikuyu people to violence cry out for recognition. By the 1950s the one million-strong Kikuyus had been reduced to the level of "squatters" on their own ancestral lands. The best arable land in Kenya - the White Highlands - was farmed almost exclusively by 30,000 or so white Kenyans. The 200,000 Africans who were registered to work in the White Highlands - more than half of them Kikuyus - were classed as "resident native labourers".

Irrespective of what the Mau Mau rebellion turned into, it started out as a response to a history of gross colonial exploitation, one that can be traced right back to the early days of British East Africa, as Kenya was once called. In the chapter titled "Letters from Nairobi", Williams describes the eerily similar fate of the Maasai in 1912 at the hands of Canadian-born governor Sir Percy Girouard.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Maasai inhabited two distinct regions in Kenya - the northern pastureland of Laikipia and the southern, drier

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plains of what is now Tanzania. White settlers, and in particular Lord Delamere, wanted Laikipia for themselves but the FCO barred any interference with Maasai land. It seemed unlikely that the Maasai would ever agree to leave Laikipia until a combination of poor rains and bureaucratic interference in traditional Maasai migration movements made Sir Percy's suggestion of a consolidation in the south look reasonable. Not all white settlers applauded the governor's actions towards the Maasai. A medical officer angrily complained to London that they were being tricked into leaving the best arable region in the country for one of the worst. "If the Maasai knew enough they would appeal to the courts and win. Because they don't", he concluded, the authorities thought it was acceptable "to wrong them".

Sir Percy overrode Foreign Office objections and initiated a botched removal programme that resulted in an exodus. But he could not overcome the uproar once the reports of mass starvation and photographs of emaciated bodies lying in the bush reached London. Nor did the Colonial Office believe his assertion that none of the Maasai's lands had been offered to white farmers. Yet by the time an official investigation revealed that the governor had allotted 23 lots of Maasai land to farmers in the south and three to Lord Delamere - 200,000 acres in total - long before negotiations with the Maasai had even started, Sir Percy had moved on to a lucrative job with the Vickers Armstrongs engineering company. Like the Cherokees of North America, the Maasai believed that the courts would remedy the injustice perpetrated against them and were hugely disappointed by the final judgment.

The narrative of this great crime is interspersed in *Running the Show* with descriptions of Sir Percy's marriage and the somewhat uncongenial life that his unhappy wife experienced. This simply will not do. Mixing faintly unhappy Britons with famished Africans is a tonal dissonance too far. The explosive revelations coming out of the Mau Mau case only serve to highlight the mismatch between subject and narrative.

Williams has a similar struggle on her hands in the chapter detailing the experiences of the Marquess of Lorne as Canada's governor general. The marquess was an amiable fellow with a keen interest in the well-being of Canada's indigenous peoples. But the fate of the Cree and Blackfoot Native Americans, which is covered in a couple of lines at the end of one chapter, far outweighs the pleasant but anodyne description of Lorne's journey to meet them.

In the chapters that are not hampered by incompatibilities of tone and subject matter, the reader is able to walk with Williams much more willingly and, indeed, find much to enjoy. After all, the extraordinary project of running an empire produced a crop of extraordinary men and women. The men who accepted one of the 50 or so governorships were in fact agreeing to subject themselves to every possible species of illness, danger, psychological pressure and political uncertainty, all for a modest salary and in the hope of a knighthood.

The death toll among governors in some parts of West Africa was so high that the posts were limited to 12-month rotations. One of the best chapters here tells the story of the heroic efforts in East Africa in 1907, led by Henry Hesketh Bell, to contain Uganda's tsetse fly. Against all the odds, Bell persuaded both London and the local chiefs to agree to a total exclusion zone of the infected areas. More than 100,000 people were transported away from 200 miles of Lake Victoria's shoreline, with just three incidents of unrest. Within two years of Governor Bell's action, numbers of deaths from sleeping sickness had dropped from the thousands to the tens.

Not so long ago, anyone attempting to write about Britain's colonial governors would have come instantly under suspicion as an unreconstructed imperialist. Nowadays, the demand for constant self-flagellation over our imperial past has fortunately gone the way of VHS and melon balls as a starter. This new tolerance for heterodoxy has allowed Williams to write an amusing and lively book, stuffed full of anecdotes and interesting tidbits. But some crimes are just too great to sandwich between letters about high tea and elephant hunting. |

Amanda Foreman latest book is "A World on Fire: an Epic History of Two Nations Divided" (Allen Lane, £30)

Running the Show: Governors of the British Empire

Stephanie Williams
Viking, 512pp, £20

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World Activist

05 May 2011 at 20:24

Thank you for sharing this. The FCO has committed crimes against human rights in Turks and Caicos and it's still on going. They have secretly taken the people's democracy and self determination right under the worlds' nose. The UK governor there, Gordon Wetherell, is legally a dictator.

Herbert

07 May 2011 at 17:02

It's very interesting to compare this review with the one in the Literary Review, where 'high tea' is still being served.

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