

# EXPLORE

**Nick Cott**

## **‘Beyond the Foundations: The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of the British Empire’**

**Explore Season Three 2025-26**

In 1815, Britain emerged from the Napoleonic Wars as the world's undisputed naval and commercial superpower. Over the following century and a half, it built the largest formal territorial empire in history, governing roughly a quarter of the world's land surface and population at its peak. Yet within a single generation of the Second World War, that empire had dissolved with a speed that astonished the world. And in 2026, its legacies remain sharply present across former colonising and colonised nations alike, continuing to provoke debate, controversy, and soul-searching on a global scale.

This series traces that extraordinary story from 1815 to the present day. We begin with the era of Pax Britannica, when Britain preferred to exercise power through trade and naval dominance rather than formal conquest, before examining the dramatic shift to territorial imperialism in the late nineteenth century: the Scramble for Africa, the consolidation of India, and the ideological machinery that sought to justify colonial rule to both rulers and ruled. We then turn to the enormous strains that two World Wars placed upon the empire, tracing the growing resistance movements across Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean that would ultimately make the formal empire untenable. The final lectures follow the rapid and often violent process of decolonisation across the globe, before asking a question that refuses easy answers: did the empire really end, or does its shadow still fall across the world today?

Throughout, the series places human experience at its centre, examining the lives and voices of the colonised as well as the colonisers, and the resisters as well as the rulers. Each lecture is followed by open discussion, and members are warmly encouraged to bring their own questions and perspectives to the conversation. No prior knowledge is assumed, and all are welcome.

05 Jun	Trade, Sea Power, and Informal Empire: 1815–1870
12 Jun	Conquest, Colonies, and the New Imperialism: 1870–1914
19 Jun	Cracks in the Edifice: Empire Under Strain, 1914–1945
26 Jun	The Wind of Change: Decolonisation, 1945–1997
03 Jul	Empire's Long Shadow: Postcolonial Legacies, 1997–2026