

Never been a colonialist? A further response to Mary Beard's other stuff argument

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. Mary Beard argues against the claim that its relationship to British colonialism adequately explains why *The Golden Bough* was popular, drawing attention to other stuff in the book aside from information about British colonies. I make an objection that British colonialists would have been interested in expanding their empire.

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Can I investigate this once more

Or will I be stuck investigating for ever more?

I wish to take up a theme which I have addressed before. Why was *The Golden Bough* so popular? Mary Beard argues that the relationship of Frazer's book to British colonialism, such as providing information about colonized peoples, cannot adequately explain why. Here is one of her reasons:

Second, *The Golden Bough* covers many topics that lie quite outside the ethnography of the British colonies. The savage customs of the empire's inhabitants are certainly prominent in the book but so also (as I have already stressed) is the world of classical antiquity, as well as the folk traditions of rural Britain. No explanation of the book's success can be satisfactory if it fails to take account of the distinctive combination of themes woven together by Frazer... (1992: 217)

This is a variation on an earlier reconstruction I made of Beard's argument (Edward 2022):

- (1) If *The Golden Bough* includes a significant amount of information which is not about the natives of British colonies, then we cannot adequately explain its popularity at the time purely by reference to its relationship to British colonialism.
- (2) *The Golden Bough* includes a significant amount of information which is not about the natives of British colonies.

Therefore (by modus ponens)

- (3) We cannot adequately explain its popularity at the time purely by reference to its relationship to British colonialism.

There is an objection to premise (1), however, which I somehow did not register when I first wrote. (My title question is directed ambiguously!)

British colonialism was not just about governing a fixed set of territories. Territories sometimes changed hands between different colonizers and presumably there were desires to acquire further territories, either those colonized by some other European power or not. This would make information about peoples living at the time but beyond their empire relevant to the British colonialist. Given this objection, the other stuff in the book that was irrelevant to the project is less than Beard thinks. And the prospects of its relationship to British colonialism fully explaining the book's popularity increase somewhat.

References. Beard, M. 1992. Frazer, Leach, and Virgil: The Popularity (and Unpopularity) of *The Golden Bough*. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (2): 203-224.

Edward, T.R. 2022. *The Golden Bough* as the handmaiden of colonialism? A response to Mary Beard. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWTGB-2>