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# ***The Loss of El Dorado: A Different Approach to Colonial History?***

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Grado en Estudios Ingleses  
San Cristóbal de La Laguna  
Julio de 2015

## **Abstract**

*The Loss of El Dorado* is a book written by V.S. Naipaul in 1969. It is a non-fiction book that narrates the history of the Caribbean island of Trinidad with the particularity that, in this case, history is told from the point of view of the colonized people and not by the colonizers. Naipaul (b. 1932) is a Trinidadian writer, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001, and one of his main characteristics as a writer is his interest in history. Due to historical reasons that are explained throughout the project, there is a lack of information about the Caribbean that makes narrating history a complex task. But, in order to get some information and to clarify the history of the Caribbean and the island of Trinidad, Naipaul uses different sources to write his book.

Trinidad was an island firstly occupied by the Spanish Empire; by the late 15th century, the Spaniards had heard about a legend that talked about the existence of a mythological place that supposedly had plenty of gold. This place was known as El Dorado. However, the Spanish Empire was not the only European power interested in finding it, as the British Empire also wanted that gold. This legend created a real race for finding El Dorado between the Spaniards and the British. This rivalry grew until the point that the British Empire conquered Trinidad and the Spaniards, who had arrived first, lost all their power in the island. This is precisely the main point of Naipaul's historical narration: the comparison between the Spanish and the British period and the contrast between the Spanish conquistador and the British conqueror. However, throughout this project I have reflected on some questions that arise after reading *The Loss of El Dorado*: Could a writer like Naipaul, who was knighted by the Queen of England, have been objective when writing his book? Did Naipaul write a true and reliable "colonial history," as he states in the cover of his book? Those are the questions that this project has tried to answer after analysing and evaluating *The Loss of El Dorado* and Naipaul's grade of objectivity.

**Keywords:** Caribbean Literature; "history-less"; Naipaul; Post-colonialism

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## 1. Introduction

The main aim of this project is to evaluate the grade of objectivity of V.S. Naipaul in his book *The Loss of El Dorado*, in order to know if Naipaul is subjective or not and why he uses different words to talk about the Spaniards or the British, as during the reading there is a sense that he changes his tone depending on whether he is describing a Spanish conquistador or a British conqueror of Trinidad. This project begins with an introduction that explains the geographical situation of the Caribbean and which countries belong to that region. After this, the history of the Caribbean, and particularly, the history of Trinidad, is explained. By doing this, the reader can observe how the real facts were told by other historians and so s/he can make a comparison between the narration of that historical period from other sources and that from Naipaul. An approach to Caribbean literature is also given after that section, and then, there is a brief biography of V.S. Naipaul. The analysis itself of the book comes after this overall introduction.

In order to analyse the novel, three main themes of *The Loss of El Dorado* were selected: El Dorado and its quest, the role of the Spanish conquistador vs. the British conqueror and slavery and racism. With them, Naipaul's objectivity can be questioned, and the style that he uses when describing the Spanish Empire or the British one can be analysed. The conclusion of the project is presented after the analysis of the book, and also, in that final section, the sources that Naipaul selected in order to write it are analysed.

The reasons why I selected post-colonialism have proper names, and they are the names of the subjects that are offered in this degree and in which post-colonial texts are analysed. I am talking about subjects such as *Cultura y Literaturas de Habla Inglesa*, *Literaturas del Mundo en Inglés* or *Debates Culturales en Lengua Inglesa*. These subjects and their contents increased my attention in this type of literature, but especially, *Literaturas del Mundo en Inglés*. In this subject, there is a part dedicated to Caribbean literature, a kind of literature that is not present in other subjects of the degree. However, this literature is fascinating because we are talking about a literature without roots and in which the Caribbean authors had to fight against different problems and adversities due to the heritage that the Europeans left in the region. The Caribbean has been for a long time a forgotten territory in literature and in history, although it is a region that offers many interesting possibilities, as this project will show.

## 2. The Caribbean and Its Literatures

### 2.1. Caribbean Geography and History

The Caribbean is a region formed by more than 7,000 islands and islets situated in the Caribbean Sea, without territories in the mainland. Nevertheless, many academics include in the definition of the Caribbean region countries such as Venezuela or Colombia. The reason is that part of their coasts is bordered by the Caribbean Sea. This project will include those countries as part of the Caribbean as well, due to their importance in the plot of *The Loss of El Dorado*. Graphically, this definition could be included in the following image:



Image 1. The Caribbean region.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, in the Caribbean region, sovereign states and territories that have different types of dependency to the United Kingdom, United States, France and Netherlands can be distinguished. Nevertheless, these are not the only countries that have been interested in this region, but also countries such as Spain or Portugal have been present. The reasons of that interest in the Caribbean have changed through the passing of time. As it is narrated in *The Loss of El Dorado*, the arrival of Christopher Columbus supposed not only the beginning of the Caribbean history, but also the beginning of the European interest in the region. Firstly, what attracted the attention of the conquerors was the legend of *El Dorado*, a mythological place which supposedly had plenty of gold. However, this gold rush vanished when it was impossible to find its location, and consequently, this dream turned into a delusion and meant a change in the European role in the zone. The new European interests are also reflected in the

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<sup>1</sup> Image taken from: «CIA map of the Caribbean» de U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) - CIA The World Factbook - Regional maps. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/docs/refmaps.html>>

novel, as it can be observed in the prologue: “But the English aim was trade; and the British Empire, when it came to Trinidad, once a part of “these provinces of El Dorado,” came as an empire of plantations and Negroes” (Naipaul 4). The trade of slaves was not exclusive in Trinidad, but in the whole region, and also the British Empire was not the unique European territory interested in this type of trade. For instance, the Spanish Empire was another case of the use of slaves. In the previous quotation, the fact that plantations were important for the British economy is also mentioned; mainly, the sugar cane was the product that the British and the rest of European empires used to import.

But before the arrival of these European powers, there were already people living in the Caribbean. According to B.W. Higman,<sup>2</sup> the first settlers of the islands were part of the great migration that crossed the Bering Strait about 15,000 years before the present, near the end of the last Ice Age (10). However, the first evidence of human presence in Trinidad is dated 7200 BP<sup>3</sup> (Higman 12). The reason why Trinidad was the first island where these people settled is that during that time, the island was still connected to the continent by an isthmus. Nevertheless, it was not a quick expansion and the arrival of people to the near islands took more time. This fact created the vision that Trinidad was part of the American continent, instead of an isolated island, as it happened in the rest of the islands (Higman 12).

The next step was the arrival to Tobago, and as it was mentioned before, it took more time in comparison with the arrival of settlers to Trinidad. In the case of Tobago, its colonization took place 2,000 years after the settlement in Trinidad (Higman 15). This was the starting point of the settlements in the other Caribbean Islands.

A second wave of migration from South America took place 2,500 years before the present. This fact made possible the creation of new cultures in the new colonized territories. According to Higman, the first culture was known as Saladoid (22). After it, in 600 AD, other cultures appeared, as for example Troumassoid and Ostinoid cultures. Saladoid people were also known as Arawak. Although they spoke Lokono, their language belonged to the Arawakan family (Higman 24). This society was becoming progressively more complex due to the growth of the population and the implantation of a hierarchical system. The difference between the biggest islands and the smallest ones could be noticed as well. That is why the

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the information used in this summary of the history of the Caribbean was taken from *A Concise History of the Caribbean*, by B.W. Higman and *The Loss of El Dorado*, by V.S. Naipaul.

<sup>3</sup> According to Higman, “Dates for years are provided as BP are Before the Present; AD signifies the common modern calendar. Populations provided for the year 2010 are based on projections, the best estimates available at the beginning of that year” (xii).

most complex societies were in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. The inhabitants of these complex societies were known as Taínos. During this time, in 1200 AD, a third wave of migration from South America took place; this group of people is known as Caribs.

The situation by the fifteenth century before the arrival of the Europeans was the following: there were two major tribes, the Taínos and the Caribs, that were settled in all the islands of the region; at this point of history, empty lands were not frequent. Calculating the numbers of inhabitants was a difficult task due to the absence of written records from that era; a fact that this project will explain in the following pages. However, some estimations can be made and for instance, it was said that the population of Hispaniola could oscillate between two millions of inhabitants a million and two millions of inhabitants (Higman 50).

On 12 October 1492, Christopher Columbus arrived to an island called Guanahaní in Taino language. It belongs to the Bahamas and it was renamed as San Salvador by Columbus. During this first voyage, the Europeans also visited the island which was later renamed as Española. Precisely, in this island it was established the first European colony, La Navidad. This settlement was built after the shipwreck of one of Columbus' ships: *Santa María*. The leader of the tribe of the zone, Guacanagarí, allowed him to settle in his territory, and Columbus knew that, supposedly, in that zone there were reserves of gold, so he decided to leave part of his crew there and establish this colony. After that decision, he returned to Europe, where he arrived on 15 March 1493.

In November 1493, Columbus returned to La Navidad during his second voyage to the Caribbean region. In contrast with his first expedition, in this case he took priests from Europe to the New World. When he arrived, he observed that his settlement was completely destroyed and all his men were dead due to different diseases and the attacks of native people. Guacanagarí said that his tribe tried to defend the European people from a rival tribe, but his version was not believed by Columbus, what supposed the implantation of a fragile peace between native and non-native people (Higman 61). As it was explained before, one of the European interests in the Caribbean was trade. Columbus' intention was to establish a royal monopoly in which private trade was not permitted. His plans of colonization and making the lands profitable consisted in the importation of plants and animals along with the exploitation of existing resources: the supposed existence of plenty of gold.

At the end of 1493, after observing the decay of La Navidad, Columbus decided to move to the north of Hispaniola and establish a new colony: La Isabela. However, his plans of

colonization started to fail when diseases and hunger appeared in the settlement. The presence of gold was becoming a dream rather than a reality; only little quantities of it were being found. All these facts made clear to him that his intentions would not make richer the Spanish Empire. This situation required a new strategy and a new economic activity: trading with human beings. In early 1494, an expedition with at least twenty indigenous slaves sailed to Seville, where these people were sold. This was the beginning of slavery in the New World, a fact that created a sense of fear among the Taínos. According to Higman, the next year, in 1495, “about 1,600 people were made captive across Hispaniola” (63). This situation led to a battle among Columbus’ men and the Taínos in March 1495; the conflict was won by the Europeans. The most serious consequence of it was the capture of different leaders of the tribes and the creation of a general system of forced labour in Hispaniola: Taínos were assigned to work for the colonizers and they had to pay in gold, cotton or spices (Higman 64-65). This was the beginning of the destruction of the Taínos.

In 1496, Columbus returned to Spain and the man who remained in charge of the administration of the island was Bartholomew Columbus, his brother. The following year, he established a new port in Hispaniola, called Santo Domingo, which quickly replaced La Isabela as the most important town of the island. The third voyage of Columbus in 1498 supposed the end of his governorship of Hispaniola. When he arrived to the island, he observed how the tribute system had failed and how many mutinies had taken place. Columbus decided to stop those problems by executing the rebels. However, the response was his arrest and his replacement as the governor of the island. The new man in charge of the administration of Hispaniola was Nicolás de Ovando, whereas Columbus was sent to Europe. Nevertheless, he was able to visit a last time the Caribbean before his death in Spain in 1506.

Columbus was only the first step of the massacres carried out by the Europeans that ended with the history of whole tribes. According to Higman, a brutal military campaign was carried out in 1503 and 1504. Many Taínos were displaced from their lands and killed in order to build new towns (72). By 1508, they were divided into two groups: those who could escape to the hills and those who were under the control of the Spaniards. Also by this time, the Spanish expansion reached others islands of the region. These massacres were not the only fact that provoked the decrease of the Taíno population, but also the diseases imported by the Europeans to the Caribbean. In ten years from 1508 to 1518, the native population in Hispaniola was reduced in 50,000 people, surviving only 11,000 Taínos.



The initial idea of the Spanish Empire was to convert indigenous people, but the truth was that that aim was forgotten since Columbus' arrival; what Spanish people were doing was an authentic genocide. On the other hand, these massive killings implied that the native inhabitants were not enough for the necessity of slaves in the Caribbean, so people from Africa were brought to the zone as slaves. The reality in the Caribbean was that whereas the Amerindian population was decreasing, the people from Europe and Africa were increasing more and more. In the case of Trinidad, the slaves from this island were used for pearl fishing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the islands of Margarita and Cubagua. According to Higman, "Trinidad was not effectively colonized by the Spanish until 1592, when it was conceived as a base for expeditions to El Dorado, the fabled place of riches" (88). What Higman means when he says "effectively colonized" is that the first stable settlement in Trinidad was created by the Spanish conqueror Antonio de Berrío. Its name was St. Joseph de Oruña.

Nevertheless, the Spanish Empire was not the only European power interested in Trinidad and its use as the starting point of the expeditions to El Dorado. According to Naipaul, in 1595, Sir Walter Raleigh arrived to the island representing the British Empire; he attacked St. Joseph de Oruña and captured de Berrío (42). Raleigh's intention was to know where El Dorado was. He visited Trinidad in 1617 again, but he obtained the same result than in his previous expedition: El Dorado could not be found. Progressively, the dream of finding El Dorado was disappearing, but the European interest in Trinidad remained for a long time. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, slavery continued being an important economic activity, but there was also another sector whose importance was growing: sugar.

According to Naipaul, since 1776, the Spanish Empire started to open its colonies in the Caribbean to people who believed in the Roman Catholic faith; this intention became a reality in 1783, when the Cedula of Population was passed (118). This edict permitted French people to establish in Trinidad under the Spanish regime. The French influence could be noticed in 1792 during the conflicts provoked by the Negroes against the Spanish totalitarian government, three years after the French Revolution (Naipaul 118). By this time the Spanish system in Trinidad was in a state of collapse, but these revolts were only the beginning. In 1797, "at about three in the afternoon the British armament began to enter the Gulf" (Naipaul 127). This was the start of the British attack to Trinidad and how the British Empire was able to conquer the island that was governed by the Spanish for centuries. Now, the governor of the islands was British; his name was Thomas Picton. However, as Naipaul relates in his book, Picton had problems with British justice when he was accused of torturing a young

woman, Luisa Calderón. *The Loss of El Dorado* finishes its historical account in 1813. According to Higman, that would be five years after the abolition by the British Parliament of slave trade (154).

This brief summary of the history of Trinidad will be useful in order to understand in a better way Naipaul's book, and to evaluate his grade of objectivity.

## **2.2. "But that's all them bastards have left us: words": An Approach to Caribbean Literature**

It is commonly said that history is written by the victors, and in the case of the Caribbean it is not an exception. The reasons why this statement is also true in this region are many; the first one is the disappearance of native people whose deaths also supposed the death of their history and cultural heritage. As it was explained in the previous section of this project, the Europeans destroyed entire tribes by killing indigenous people or enslaving them. Another action that made difficult the survival of their history was the loss of their own languages:

Where possible, slaves were isolated from their common language group and transported and sold in "mixed lots," as a deliberate means of limiting the possibilities of rebellion. [...] The result was that within two or three generations (sometimes within one) the only language available to the Africans for communication either amongst themselves or with the master was the European language of that master. [...] They were forced to develop the skill of being able to say one thing in front of "massa" and have it interpreted differently by their fellow slaves. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 146)

In this context, it is clear that the voice of history belonged to the Europeans, and the native voice did not exist to tell its point of view. However, there were some Europeans that were interested in narrating both sides of the story. One of these men belonged to Columbus's crew; his name was Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1576). He is considered the first person who was interested in natives' lives and his work, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), is considered an example of his fight against the injustices that were taking place in the Caribbean, as Dennis Walder explains in the following extract:

[...] *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* represented the first of many struggles by Christian missionaries and enlightened Europeans against the behaviour of their compatriots abroad; although Las Casas (who preserved and edited Columbus's diaries) also saw the Spanish conquest as a great opportunity for Christian conversion, and his revelations were later used as much for the purposes of anti-Spanish propaganda to undermine the achievements of Europe. Even today, in our post-holocaust times, Las Casas makes chilling reading. His task, as he saw it, was to bear witness to the manner in which a trading and evangelizing mission had been transformed into genocide, the predominantly peaceful and friendly indigenous people treated worse than wild dogs, in the headlong rush for precious metals, land and power. (29)

Following this interest in the natives from the West Indies shown by Las Casas, the post-colonial literature from the Caribbean would later be interested in this period of history as well. The interests of the Caribbean writers were initially shaped by the fact that their history was destroyed and therefore, the killings that took place in their territories. The facts that influenced their writings are perfectly summarized by Walder:

For writers from the Caribbean, a more radically disturbing view of the past has arisen out of their experience of colonization –which involved the virtual extinction of the local indigenous population, and its replacement by slaves and indentured labourers from Africa and Asia. (116)

This lack of history from the point of view of the oppressed part is the motivation that many Caribbean writers have followed when writing their works. In Caribbean literature, this lack of information is commonly known as “history-less.” This concept is vital in Caribbean literature, and many authors organize their writings around it, as for example Derek Walcott or V.S. Naipaul, the two only Caribbean writers that have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Walcott in 1992 and Naipaul in 2001. In the case of Walcott, he analyses history and the lack of it in his work “The Muse of History” (1974), in which he argues that the form by which history is narrated depends on the point of view of the writers or historians in charge of the text. Naipaul goes further than Walcott, and with *The Loss of El Dorado*, he fights against history-less trying to give a historical account of the island of Trinidad from the Trinidadian point of view. In his book, it can be observed how the Europeans stole the lands and the history to the natives, a fact related to another important concept in Caribbean literature: displacement.

The recovery of history and the displacement suffered by the natives are closely related, since the indigenous people felt that they were not present in their own history: the history of the Caribbean was European. The European influence in the region reached a level in which English was imposed as the language used among the Caribbean people, and that imposition meant the subjugation to the culture of the colonizer. As Frantz Fanon explains in his work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), “to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization”(17).

The title of this section is a quotation from the poem, “The Schooner Flight” (1979), by Derek Walcott. It is clear that language was an important tool used to control the colonized territories, because the colonized peoples lost part of their culture and also because the

mentality of the empire was established in the native society, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain in the following extract:

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a “standard” version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all “variants” as impurities. [...] Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of “truth,” “order,” and “reality” become established. (7)

This linguistic influence can be noticed in post-colonial literature and the great majority of Caribbean authors uses the language that was established in their territories under the European domination. The situation is that their language disappeared without remedy, but now it can be used as a tool in a different way. For instance, Walcott tells in his poem, “The Sea is History” (1979), how the Caribbean does not have a brilliant history in comparison with Europe: “Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, / in that gray vault. The sea. The sea / has locked them up. The sea is History”. This poem was originally written in English, the most spoken language in the Western World, so if the poem is in English, a bigger audience will be interested in the text and its message. Using English as the language for his texts, Walcott, like many other Caribbean writers, will be able to spread his messages and the reality of the Caribbean throughout the whole world. For example, with this poem in English he also explains that there is another branch in Caribbean literature that defends that now, after independence, is when the Caribbean is having its own history. The history told by Las Casas and the rest of Europeans that were interested in the region was the narrative of the European history of the Caribbean, and now, it is time to have a Caribbean history on its own, as the final stanza of “The Sea is History” reflects: “and in the salt chuckle of rocks / with their sea pools, there was the sound / like a rumour without any echo / of History, really beginning.”

Since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different Caribbean authors who wrote in English appeared. The first major figure in Anglophone Caribbean literature was H.G. de Lisser (Jamaica, 1878-1944). Other important authors from this period of time were Claude McKay (Jamaica, 1889-1948) and C.L.R. James (Trinidad, 1901-1989). From the second half of the century, apart from V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad, 1932) and Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia, 1930), two other names must be highlighted: George Lamming (Barbados, 1927) and Austin Clarke (Barbados, 1934). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, authors such as Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua, 1949), Dionne Brand (Trinidad, 1953), David Dabydeen (Guyana, 1955) or Caryl Phillips (Saint Kitts, 1958) are the most relevant figures of the Caribbean literature written in English.

It is remarkable the fact that the great majority of these authors migrated to Europe, the United States or Canada, becoming part of the Caribbean diaspora. They are writers concerned with the problems of the Caribbean, although some of them, as Caryl Phillips, lived during their childhood outside the Caribbean, particularly in Britain. But this does not mean that they are less critical with the European powers or the USA. For instance, in the case of Jamaica Kincaid, she is very critical with the colonial powers America and with the problems that her island, Antigua, is suffering.

### **2.3. Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul**

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad, on 17 August 1932. He is a descendant from an Indian family who had immigrated to Trinidad as indentured servants. He studied at Queen's Royal College (Trinidad), where he obtained a scholarship to study at the University of Oxford, in England. During his period in England, he worked briefly for the BBC as a writer in London. There, Naipaul also worked as editor for the "Caribbean Voices" programme.

In London, he passed difficult situations and, as David Pryce-Jones wrote: "Nothing sustained him afterwards except the determination, often close to despair, to become a writer." Precisely, that was what he decided to do. His first published work, called *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), was a success and it won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1958. His first publications were based on Trinidadian society, whereas his first novel set in England was *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963). This novel was another success in Naipaul's career; it won in 1964 the Hawthornden Prize. After these publications, his style of writing became concerned with colonial and post-colonial issues. According to Pryce-Jones, the reason of this change was his travels around the world: "Footloose, he began to travel for long periods in India and Africa. It was at a time of decolonisation, when so many people the whole world over had to reassess their identity. Naipaul saw for himself the resulting turmoil of emotions." In 1971, he won the Booker Prize. His close link with England was reinforced when in 1990 he was knighted for his services to literature. Four years later, in 1993, Naipaul won the David Cohen British Literature Prize by the Arts Council of England. Nevertheless, his major prize was in 2001 when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. According to the Swedish Academy, it was awarded to Naipaul "for having united perceptive narrative and

incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories."<sup>4</sup> Some other works by Naipaul are *The Mimic Men* (1967); *In a Free State* (1971); *Guerrillas* (1975); *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987); *A Way in the World* (1994) or *Magic Seeds* (2004). Nowadays, Naipaul lives in Wiltshire, England.

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<sup>4</sup> "V. S. Naipaul - Facts." *Nobel Prize*. Web. 24 June 2015.  
<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2001/naipaul-facts.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2001/naipaul-facts.html)>

### 3. *The Loss of El Dorado*

#### 3.1. El Dorado

The following quote belongs to the first paragraph of the prologue of *The Loss of El Dorado* and since the beginning of the book it can be observed that El Dorado is one of the most important themes in it:

This book is made up of two forgotten stories. The first is the story of the end of the search for El Dorado. The story is usually told in Sir Walter Raleigh's words and as part of his experience alone. It begins with his raid on Trinidad and South America in 1595 and ends with his inexplicable return in 1617, a prisoner paroled from the Tower of London. El Dorado, though, is essentially a Spanish delusion. The inland town of St. Joseph in Trinidad with its port –had been founded as the base for El Dorado. It was the total achievement of a seventy-five-year-old conquistador; it came at the end of one of the great Spanish journeys across South America. For the conquistador the El Dorado adventure ended in kidnap, solitude and lunacy. His province –the dream of the third Spanish marquisate in the New World, after Mexico and Peru –became the ghost province of the Spanish Empire. (3)

Naipaul relates how the quest of El Dorado was the main reason why the Spanish decided to establish in the Caribbean; it was the beginning of the Spanish interest in the region. El Dorado was the centre of the Spanish journeys; everything moved around it. The Spanish Empire was not the only European power interested in finding El Dorado, but also the British Empire, as Naipaul says. Many expeditions were carried out in order to find that mythological place, which supposedly had plenty of gold, and the origin of those expeditions was the legend of a tribe from Colombia and its sacrifices to the gods, as Philip Ainsworth Means explained in his work, *The Spanish Main: Focus of Envy* (1935):

The truth of the El Dorado matter was that the Chibcha chieftain of Guatabita in the highland of Colombia was wont to make, prior to his accession or, as some say, annually, a sacrifice to the gods by throwing gold and other precious objects into a lake in his small dominion. He then performed an impressive lustral rite in the course of which he was anointed with a sticky substance other which was scattered finely powdered gold, so that he glistened like a Golden Man –El Dorado. At the proper moment, from a ceremonial raft, he plunged into the water and ritualistically washed from his person the gold-dust upon it.

Simple enough is the basis in fact of the El Dorado legend; but the fantastic proportions to which it grew, not only among the Spaniards but also among the Germans in Venezuela and later the English in Guiana, pass all bournes of sense. From a charming and simple lustral ceremony on the water of a little tarn in the highlands of Bogota arose a glittering dream in which the reality, a Gilded Man, became transformed by the gold-seeking imaginations of men into a Golden Kingdom. (105)

Therefore, as Means narrated, El Dorado existed. However, it was not the same reality that the Europeans had in mind; the transformation of the myth into a fantasy is compared by Naipaul in *The Loss of El Dorado* with the creation of *Robinson Crusoe*:

Fact and fiction meet: Berrio links the two fantasies of the New World. To be the first man on the earth, to see the first shoots of the first crop, to let off “the first gun that had been

fired there since the creation of the world”: it is an aspect of what the El Dorado quest had become. And *Robinson Crusoe* in its essential middle part is a monologue; it is all in the mind. Men are nearly always far away, active but silent, privately engaged, as though seen through a telescope. (27)

*Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was based on a real shipwreck, but Daniel Defoe changed some real facts in his fiction, the same process that suffered the myth of El Dorado. It is true that it existed, but the reality was that it was a tribe that made sacrifices using gold, something completely different to what the Spanish understood. The Spanish created a settlement with the only intention of finding El Dorado, a clear example of how fiction affects to the real world. Nevertheless, El Dorado not only provoked the creation of towns in the Caribbean, but also the massacres of native people or their enslavement.

For the Europeans, El Dorado was a source of gold, their main objective in the colonization of the Caribbean was its quest. But for the natives, it was not so exotic. As it was previously mentioned, the reason for creating establishments in the region was El Dorado, and the reason why entire tribes disappeared was El Dorado as well. For the Chibchas, it was only their method of sacrifice, but they would have never imagined that part of their culture would become the reason of so many deaths and horrors.

The other part involved in the quest, the British Empire, is also mentioned in *The Loss of El Dorado*, where it is explained that gold was also the motor that put in motion the British journeys to the Caribbean at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Once they knew that the Spanish were looking for El Dorado, the British Empire also showed its interest in the mythological place. The following extract of the book shows the beginning of the race for finding El Dorado between the Spanish and the British:

The adventure wasn't over. They [Englishmen] still had Baltasar, the Spanish-speaking Indian captive; and they had picked up another Indian. They asked Baltasar about El Dorado. He didn't want to talk. He was "threatened unto death", he talked. He said he would take them to El Dorado. The other Indian required no pressing; he said that all the stories about El Dorado were true; "the salvages theare hanged rich peeces of golde aboute their neckes in the steed of breastplates". Wyatt and the others remembered later that the Indian had only "confirmed" this, and "by signs".

But it was enough for Dudley.<sup>5</sup> He said he would go with Baltasar to El Dorado. (Naipaul 37)

This huge interest in finding El Dorado not only provoked the deaths of natives, but also it provoked conflicts between the Spanish and the British Empire. According to Naipaul, in

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<sup>5</sup> His full name was Sir Robert Dudley. According to Naipaul, he was the illegitimate son of the Earl of Leicester and "a good navigator" (30). He was one the Englishmen involved in the quest of El Dorado in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.



1595, Sir Walter Raleigh with his British troops attacked St. Joseph de Oruña, the Spanish base for their journeys to El Dorado. So, the race for El Dorado was reaching an enormous perspective among different European powers, whereas for the natives, it was only part of their culture transformed into the reason of their extinction.

The price of finding El Dorado did not matter; the means were a secondary issue. What was important was the objective: finding El Dorado. However, as it is explained in *The Loss of El Dorado*, that fantasy became a delusion for all the parts involved in the race when they finally became aware that it did not exist, and the origin of the myth was not as incredible as they thought. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was finally admitted that El Dorado as such did not exist. Different European powers were tired of looking for El Dorado without finding any satisfactory result, a fact that supposed a shock in Europe as Naipaul relates in the following extract:

IT WAS AN ACT of madness. The Spaniards no longer looked for El Dorado. The Dutch had found nothing; the French had found nothing. Robert Harcourt had ridiculed the idea; Sir Thomas Roe had found nothing. Guiana had given up its mysteries, of tobacco and Indian tribal antagonism, to scores of merchants. Raleigh himself no longer spoke of El Dorado and the Great Manoa; but in the Tower of London he had continued to dream of mines and a crystal mountain. (76)

In this excerpt, it is reflected how the different European powers put an end to the quest of El Dorado; the golden dream was finished. The result of El Dorado was nothing. The only consequences of the quest were the incalculable deaths of native people, their enslavement and the deaths of European people. Nothing good was obtained from El Dorado, a dream that was exaggerated by the Europeans, as it happened with *Robinson Crusoe*, but in its case, it took place in fiction. In the quest of El Dorado, the confusion and the deaths were real.

It is remarkable how the myth of El Dorado and its confusion was not something new during the discovery of America. It is well known that Christopher Columbus arrived to America by chance, and other misunderstandings are mentioned as well by Naipaul:

Columbus, coming to Trinidad, thought he had come to the outer approaches of the Garden of Eden. He asked the natives for pearls: pearls were created from drops of dew falling into open oysters. The natives were pale: a disappointment: the greatest riches of the world were to be found in the lands of the blackest Negroes. On the Atlantic, the Ocean Sea, flying fish had just been fish that flew into Columbus's ship: another confirmed item in the created world's finite catalogue. (5)

The case of El Dorado is particular because a specific confusion had never had the level of repercussion that the golden dream had: death in exchange for nothing.

### 3.2. The Role of the Conqueror: Spanish Conquistador vs. British Conqueror

Naipaul's analysis of the history of Trinidad describes the life in the island from the Spanish arrival until the British conquest, and precisely, that is the main point of his narration: the contrast between the two Empires. The truth was that the situation of the Spanish Empire was not as wonderful as the Spanish texts from that time reflected. Since the beginning of *The Loss of El Dorado*, Naipaul gives really hard descriptions of the Spaniards and their Empire, as this extract from the foreword shows: "Spanish imperial correspondence was slow; it could take two years for a letter from Trinidad to be read in Madrid. In 1625, eight years after Raleigh's attempt on the 'gold-mines' of Guiana, the Spaniards were still exchanging letters about the consequences" (xiii).

He criticizes all the aspects of the Spaniards, and not only how the Empire worked. For instance, Naipaul also uses hard words to describe Spanish literature during the colonial period in the Caribbean, saying that the Spanish conquerors were only concerned with basic aspects of the region and how much poor their narratives were:

To the conquistador where there were no wonders there was nothing. A place was then its name alone, and landscape was land, difficult or easy. Valleys, mountain ranges, peaks, woods, meadows, rivers, plains and springs, with naked, noble natives: this inaccurate catalogue is a Spanish priest's description of Trinidad in 1570. The sparseness of much Spanish narrative is a Spanish deficiency. Untouched by imagination or intellect, great actions become mere activity, it is part of the Spanish waste. El Dorado becomes an abstraction; deaths become numbers. (6)

Precisely, Naipaul makes his first comparison between the Spanish Empire and the British making reference to the kind of literature of both European powers. He says that Spanish narratives were worthless, but when he describes British texts, he argues that British writers were excellent, even when they talked about Spanish issues, they were marvellous. For example, the next excerpt of the book shows how Raleigh's narrative of his voyages throughout the Caribbean described all the details of the Spanish problems in Trinidad:

The man on whom the quest depended was the seventy-five-year-old conquistador Raleigh had dispossessed. All the knowledge of El Dorado he had acquired over fifteen years and three journeys, at the cost of a fortune, had been plundered by Raleigh and set out in Raleigh's new book, *The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana*. That book, published months after the event, had also told of the conquistador's capture and disgrace. (7)

It is remarkable how Naipaul says that Raleigh was able to write down all the facts carried out by Antonio de Berrío. It is true that they had many conversations but it seems quite improbable that Sir Walter Raleigh could explain actions that, as Naipaul said, were not

explained accurately by the Spanish narratives. The British conqueror could not describe with that precision facts in which he was not present and facts that were not recorded in detail in Spanish texts.

However, Naipaul not only focuses his comparison between both Empires on the type of historical narratives that Spaniards and British produced, but also he criticizes the producers of those texts: the conquerors and the citizens as a whole. About the Spaniards, he says that “The egoism is another side of the Spanish simplicity” (6) or that “Berrío went foolish” (47). It is impossible to read a good comment by Naipaul about the Spaniards and their Empire, but when talking about the British, the situation changes:

To the compiler of a dictionary of biography in the next century the young Dudley was “a compleat gentleman” in the Elizabethan way: “an exact seaman, a good navigator, an excellent architect, mathematician, physician, chymist and what not”. He was tall in the saddle, noted for his tilting and noted too “for being the first of all that taught a dog to sit in order to catch partridges. (30)

In the previous quotation, it is true that Naipaul says that for this description, he used a particular source,<sup>6</sup> but the point here is that there is no presence of criticism to Sir Robert Dudley, which supposes a different tone in contrast with the words that he uses when talking about the Spaniards. After all, the Spaniards and the British went to the Caribbean with the same objective: to colonize the region.

In this sense, Naipaul goes further and he also adds that the Spanish officials showed an attitude of wonder to English precious metals: “He [Raleigh] distributed what the Spanish Judge of All Irregularities later called ‘curious things he had brought from England’” (49). Here, Naipaul relates how Raleigh took to the Caribbean something that seems to be marvellous, but the truth was that that fantastic element was “the new money of 20 shillings with Her Majesties picture” (49). It is remarkable how Naipaul highlights that the Spaniards observed money in the same way that the natives probably did, without knowing exactly what Raleigh was showing.

However, Naipaul’s critique of the Spanish world does not finish here, and he attacks the Spanish Empire as a whole. The next quotation describes how the Spanish Empire was so bad-organized that the own Spanish citizens had not anything to eat: “The Spaniards, even in extremity, never planted; they depended on the Indians for food. When the Indians withdrew,

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<sup>6</sup> The sources used by Naipaul to write *The Loss of El Dorado* are analyzed in the conclusion of this project.

when no crops were planted, the Spaniards starved” (59). Therefore, it is clear that Naipaul criticizes all the Spanish entities, since the last citizen until the whole empire, and depicts the Spaniards so stupid that they were not able to plant and to avoid their own deaths. His tone when describing the British Empire was not equal, although, as it was said before, both empires had the same aim in the Caribbean and both were the European powers looking for new colonies.

In other cases, the comparison is focused on the level of civilization and education of the Spaniards and the British. It is well-known that the Spanish Empire killed entire tribes, and surely they were bigger in comparison with the British ones. Nevertheless, Naipaul does not mention anything about the massacres carried out by the British Empire, and he describes the British as civilized people who tried to colonize and to find El Dorado in a pacific way:

With his two Spanish prisoners Raleigh then went to Port of Spain. He stayed there for three days. He called the chiefs and spoke to them through one of his interpreters.

“I made them understand that I was the servant of a Queene, [...] that shee was an enemie to the Castellani in respect of their tyrannie and oppression, and that she delivered all such nations about her, as were by them oppressed, and having freed all the coast of the Northren world from their servitude, had sent mee to free them also, and withal to defend the cuntry of Guiana from their invasion and conquest. (45-46)

In this case, Raleigh was talking about the pacific methods used by the British to colonize the Caribbean, but that pacifism is suspicious because the British Empire did not sign a treaty with the natives in order to get their lands. This fact happened in other British colonies such as New Zealand, where the British elaborated a pacific treaty (Treaty of Waitangi, 1840) with the Maori people to get the permission to create a British settlement in their lands.

In another passage of *The Loss of El Dorado*, the education of the British is presented as so fantastic that they unchained a native that had been caught by the Spaniards. The British thought that it was not a correct way of treating a person and they invited him to eat with them: “The chained Indian in Palomeque’s house had got into trouble for openly abusing the Spaniards and saying he was glad the English were coming. The English now treated him with honour” (86).

However, it must be said that there is a Spanish possession in the book that Naipaul does not criticize, but just the opposite, he praises it. It is the Trinidad Negro Code.<sup>7</sup> For Naipaul, “it was a good code. It was issued from the Royal Palace at Aranjuez in Spain; but it had been

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<sup>7</sup> More information about the Trinidad Negro Code will be provided in section 2.3.

written by a Trinidad French planter who – like Governor Chacon, already – had a mulatto family” (116). Practically, this is the only passage from *The Loss of El Dorado* in which his author uses soft words to define something from the Spanish Empire. But the case is that Naipaul’s praises are not all that complete, as he remarks that the Code was written by a French man. If Naipaul catches by surprise the audience telling that the Spaniards created a good code, the surprise is bigger when he criticizes the British, a fact that only occurs in some moments of the book.

In the British case, Naipaul does not criticize the British in general, but he focuses his critics on a British man called Sir Thomas Picton. He was the first British governor of Trinidad and when referring to him, Naipaul uses hard words as he did with the Spaniards as a whole. Precisely, it seems that Naipaul tries to convince the readers that Picton was not a real British man, and his attitude and behaviour is closer to the Spaniards rather than to the British, as the next excerpt shows:

Picton supplied his estates with stock and timber and other stores, including salt-fish for his Negroes, by illegal barter with United States ships. There was a sharp letter from London; Picton, like any Spanish governor two hundred years before, replied that he had only wanted to preserve the island from absolute want and famine. Merchants in London complained about the excessive duties they paid in Trinidad. Picton promised to send the accounts but didn’t: his accountant was “indisposed.” (168-169)

Naipaul is so sure that Picton was a not a typical British man that he compares him with the rest of British citizens and shows that Picton was an exceptional case. The next passage of *The Loss of El Dorado* narrates the arrival of new immigrants from Britain; nevertheless, Picton was such bad governor that his own compatriots did not accept him:

Peace brought its anxieties to a soldier, and it brought an especial threat to Picton. He had ruled so far as a British governor, the representative of British power, in a foreign colony. Now, with the peace, British immigrants began to come, some from the other islands, some from England. Picton looked upon them as intruders, “the scum and sediment of the West Indies” or insolvent shopkeepers and adventurers from Liverpool and Lancaster. He couldn’t stop them coming; but he kept them out of Government House. [...]

The newcomers had their own objections to Picton. He was born, they said, “of obscure parents somewhere on the mountains of Wales” and “bred among the goats”. (170-171)

Naipaul excludes Picton from the rest of British citizens and he emphasizes the idea that he was an exception. It is also remarkable how Naipaul justifies Picton’s behaviour narrating testimonies from the new British citizens of Trinidad who argue that Picton had a difficult childhood and his strong attitude has well founded reasons. Nevertheless, Naipaul is not so understanding when talking about the Spanish Empire, and he does not give any reason why

the Spaniards behaved in one way or another. However, as it was mentioned before, Naipaul not only does not give any justification to the Spaniards' behaviour but he evaluates them with his own opinion and words. But again, another British ruler made a mistake during his period as Governor of Trinidad. His name was William Fullarton. He was one of the members of the commission formed in Trinidad after the accusations of Picton. However, he was not the solution and he committed mistakes as it is explained in the following extract:

Less than a week after he had left, it was discovered that Fullarton had cleaned out the Trinidad Treasury, which on his arrival six months before had been 100,000 dollars in balance, the savings of six years. Money remained on the island after Fullarton, with the British merchants and the planters living on credit from the merchants. But the government was bankrupt for year. (255)

It is interesting how in this case, Naipaul does not give his personal opinion, and he says that Fullarton had taken the money from the government as a mere anecdote. The question is: if the person who stole the money was Spanish, what would have happened? Would Naipaul's description have been the same? Probably not. After these examples, it is clear that Naipaul changes his tone depending on if he is describing the Spaniards or the British, and he would make value judgments if a Spanish Governor was the person that led Trinidad to bankruptcy.

### **3.3. Slavery and Racism**

Apart from the quest of El Dorado and the distinction between Spanish and British conquerors, another important theme in *The Loss of El Dorado* is slavery and how the natives and non-white people were treated. Particularly, Naipaul focuses his attention on two symbols of the oppression and tortures that took place in the island: Jean Baptiste Vallot and his jail, and the torture of Luisa Calderón. As it was explained in section 1.1 of this project, since the Spanish arrival to the Caribbean, black and native people were used as workers for the Spanish Empire. First of all, they worked as fishers of pearls, but then, they were forced to work in sugar plantations. The nationalities of the masters of these plantations were diverse: firstly, the greatest part of them was Spanish, but then, the Spanish frontiers in the Caribbean were opened and many French masters moved to Trinidad, for instance. After the British conquest of the island, Spanish masters were less and the number of British men increased. However, if there was something that all the masters from different nationalities had in common, that was their exploitation of Negroes and natives.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the Spanish regime, the increase of Negroes as workers in Trinidad and the influence of the French Revolution provoked some revolts in the Spanish colonies, a fact that created the necessity of writing the Trinidad Negro Code in order to calm those revolts. In *The Loss of El Dorado*, Naipaul gives an idea of how the lives of the Negroes were:

Negroes were to be given Catholic instruction and baptized within a year of their arrival. They had to be fed and clothed adequately. Every Negro had to have a bed of his own and there were to be no more than two to a room. It was to be understood that the chief occupation of Negroes was agriculture “and not those labours that call for a sedentary life”. Every Negro was to be allowed two hours a day to work on his own plot, and he was to be paid two dollars a year [...].

Punishments were restricted to prison, chains and the whip. A Negro could be whipped only by his owner or the owner’s steward; not more than twenty-five lashes were to be given for any offence and there was to be “no contusion or effusion of blood.” (115)

Although it seems a Code that did not respect Negroes, the truth was that in other European colonies they were treated in a worse manner, and in the case of Trinidad, the situation of slaves became harder after the British conquest of the island. The reason of these harder conditions had a proper name: Sir Thomas Picton. In 1797, when he became the first British governor of Trinidad, and in spite of the fact that during this period the British Empire was being softer with its slaves, Picton was doing the contrary and Negroes were living in worse conditions in comparison with the Spanish period. Naipaul describes him as a symbol of the horror that Trinidad was living during the first years of the British regime:

Trinidad, with no law or lawyers and only a memory of Spanish forms, was Picton’s kingdom. He was the law; the French planters were his barons. For them in 1800 he rewrote the Negro Code. The Spanish code had reduced a Negro to his needs. The new code was concerned only with the needs and the fears of the Negro’s owner.

The limit on floggings was raised from twenty-five lashes to thirty-nine. Negroes had to carry passes and were to be whipped, twenty-five lashes, if they were found on the streets after nine. Negro dances had to end at nine sharp; the sale of rum to Negroes, except in quantities of five gallons and over, was banned; a free man of colour who admitted a Negro to a dance was to be fined. A special Saturday-night patrol enforced these regulations in Port of Spain. (166-167)

In this atmosphere of racism, Picton was the real master of the island and the starting point of the tortures to Negroes. As it was mentioned before, Picton’s best ally was Vallot and his jail in Port of Spain. Naipaul uses that jail as the main symbol of the tortures in Trinidad, and he uses hard terms when he defines and describes the life inside it, as the next excerpt of his work shows:

The jailer in the Port of Spain jail, a Frenchman with the good jailer’s name of Vallot, got fees whenever he was asked to flog a Negro or – this was the punishment Picton had

prescribed for runaways – when he cut off a Negro’s ears. Vallot preferred then to get his fees in advance, in case of accident. Once a Negro dropped dead as soon as the knife cut into his ear; no owner would have paid the ear-clipping fee after that. Vallot charged two bits a day, about a shilling or twenty cents, for every Negro in jail. This covered the imprisonment charge and food: salt-fish, dried horse-meat and bread. (169)

The level of racism in Trinidad was growing more and more, and in order to reflect that fight against Negroes, Naipaul tells the story of Luisa Calderón, a girl who “was about fourteen, the youngest of the three daughters of a manumitted Venezuelan mulatto woman” (184). By this time, the tortures were being carried out without any discrimination, and this girl was accused of robbery by her fiancé, due to his jealousy. According to Naipaul, this man simply told Picton that Luisa had stolen something from him, an accusation that was enough to sentence her to be tortured:

The torture instrument was simple. A pulley was fixed to the ceiling. Over the pulley passed a length of rope with a small noose at one end. Set in the floor directly below the pulley was a tapering wooden stake six inches high. The top of the stake was flat, circular, half an inch in diameter. (188)

Picton’s regime of terror finished after this torture. According to Naipaul, the British Empire called him to go back urgently to England because this treatment could not be accepted in Trinidad while in the other colonies Negroes’ conditions were becoming better, a fact that was confirmed in 1834 when slavery was abolished in the British Empire. However, in India for instance, a colony very close to Naipaul’s roots, this racism remained because it was territory that belonged to the East India Company.

Another case that shows that the improvement of non-whites conditions was partial was South Africa. In this case, the racial segregation remained until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, when Naipaul argues that in the rest of British colonies the situation of Negroes was being improved, he is not completely right. The situation in Trinidad was only an example of what was happening in the British Empire, and although laws in favour of non-whites were passed, the truth was that the reality had nothing to do with what was happening in other British possessions.



#### 4. Conclusion

*The Loss of El Dorado* begins with the narration of the disappointment of not finding El Dorado, one of the main themes of the book. At the end, due to a confusion between the Europeans and the golden dream, entire tribes have disappeared and when he describes it, Naipaul is magnificent. Another theme in which he supports his narration is slavery, and again, his style is unique. However, when he narrates the Spanish and the British Governments of Trinidad, Naipaul seems to be biased. In the postscript of the book, Naipaul explains the sources that he used during its creation, and in this part, there is an important paragraph that clarifies how he wrote the book: “This narrative was structured mainly from documents – originals, copies, printed – in the British Museum, the Public Record Office, London, and the London Library. Most of the translations are my own. Dialogue occurs as dialogue in the sources” (357).

The sources that he consulted in those places in Britain are mainly British sources, and only a little part of them are texts that originally were written in Spanish. That is the main reason why Naipaul is softer when he describes the British: he only visited places where the greatest part of the sources are British. The main aim of Naipaul with *The Loss of El Dorado* is to fight against the lack of history, known as “history-less” and to clarify the history of Trinidad, but using similar sources, the result cannot be objective. He is upset with the fact that history is written by the victors, but he seems closer to the victors rather than to the losers. Naipaul’s sympathy with Britain is not new, and as it was explained in his biography, he was even knighted by the Queen of England, a paradoxical fact taking into account that he is a postcolonial writer who felt oppressed by the Europeans.

The intention of this project has not been to defend the Spaniards and their Empire, but to evaluate the level of objectivity of Naipaul. The facts that he explains about the Spanish Empire are true, since everybody knows the atrocities that they did in the Caribbean. That is not Naipaul’s mistake. I think that his mistake is to defend the British Empire when it was just another European power whose main aim was to occupy lands in each continent. The critiques Naipaul makes to the Spanish Empire are valid for the British one as well, and that is, in my opinion, what he should have done if he wanted to write a true “Colonial History.”

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