

Empire Online at the University of Southampton



Dr Christopher Prior, an Associate Professor in Colonial and Postcolonial History at the University of Southampton, has integrated Adam Matthew Digital's *Empire Online* into a third-year special subject module taken by History students in their final year.

Dr Prior incorporated *Empire Online* in his two-part course 'HIST3180: The Rise and Fall of the British Empire in Africa Part 1' and 'HIST3181: The Rise and Fall of the British Empire in Africa Part 2'. Part 1 examines the rise and consolidation of the colonial state, "from when the dust of conflict settled at the dawn of the twentieth century to the Second World War". Part 2 in the second semester considers the gradual dismantlement of the colonial state. It examines British post-war hopes for their colonies, the rise of constitutional and violent opposition to the colonial state, and the countdown to the transferral of power to independent African nation states.

One of the key aims of this course is to introduce students to the interactions between the British imperial state and African communities in the twentieth century through a diverse range of primary sources.

The importance of primary sources

With primary source material from American, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, German and British perspectives, as well as that of indigenous peoples from Africa, India and North America, *Empire Online* provides varying points-of-view for comparative research. The collection supported Dr Prior's emphasis on comparative study as a means of assessing how far local conditions on the ground affected the implementation of policies as devised by central authorities in London and colonial capitals.

Final-year special subjects centre around primary source work throughout the whole year of study, which makes it important for students to have access to a wide range of relevant sources. Final-year students, who are also working on their dissertation, are expected to use and engage with primary sources on a regular basis. "The whole module runs without any lectures", Dr Prior explained. "There are two teaching sessions per week that are solely seminar-based, and heavily reliant on primary sources for this reason. Every session uses primary sources."

In their final year, students start to find their own specialisations and develop their own style. Dr Prior's students can pick any essay title in consultation with him as module tutor. "The essay rubric stipulates that students must use primary source materials to make substantial conclusions", Dr Prior said, "so they cannot simply rely on synthesising the works of other historians". Using *Empire Online* creates a wider bank of primary sources, from all over the world, to use in their essays and research. This access to a breadth of primary sources is important when they are forming their own ideas, opinions and conclusions.

Impact on teaching

Empire Online was also crucial in enabling Dr Prior to run seminars on topics for which primary source material is more intermittently available, such as on education and health. Having access to a wider range of sources, through *Empire Online* means that he is confident that it is possible for students to engage with issues beyond "elite political matters" – topics like education and health – in depth and in detail in their essays.

"Empire Online has enabled me to teach a broader range of topics, confident in the knowledge that students will be supported should they choose to engage with these topics in greater depth."

Impact on students

Empire Online has impacted on the quality of assignments by enabling students to tackle the sorts of topics in their essays that they would like to tackle, rather than being limited to a smaller field. At special subject level, access to more primary sources correlates to greater accessibility of topics for students to research, increasing engagement. In addition, as a final-year undergraduate module, students are expected to engage in sustained independent or small-group study, commensurate with the sort of work they do on their dissertations at the same time.

With the majority of their final year centring around the work they produce, in different formats, on original documents, it is key for students to feel they have autonomy over their own work and that they are not restricted by pre-set boundaries due to lack of access. Digital primary sources allow students to take part in this work on campus or at home, not limited by geographical location or travel opportunities. *Empire Online* allows students to explore colonial history, society, trade and travel, politics and culture through a wide range of topics and material types, from letters to photographs, from ship's logs to missionary papers.

"Empire Online has made the whole essay-writing process more engaging for the students because they can pursue things in keeping with their own interests."



Dr Christopher Prior is an Associate Professor in Colonial and Postcolonial History and Director of Programmes at the University of Southampton. He is a historian of Britain and the British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and is currently researching British foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa in the wake of decolonisation.