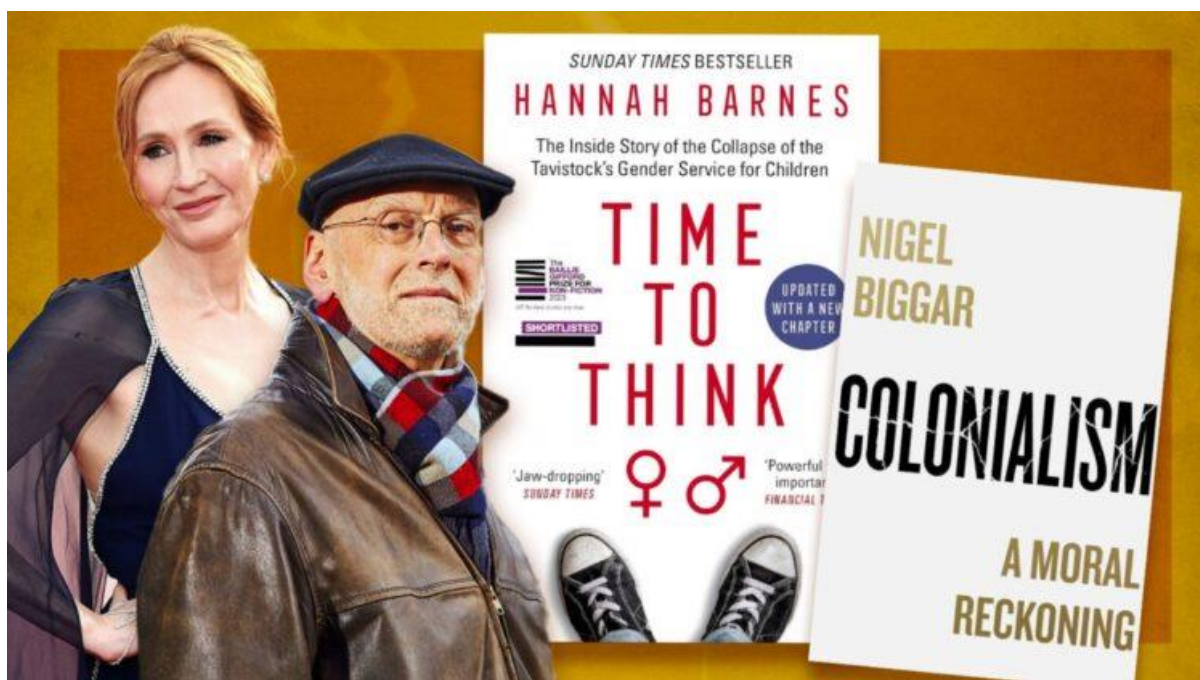


FREE SPEECH UNION

How Bloomsbury dropped books on gender ideology and British colonialism

- BY Frederick Attenborough
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One of Britain's biggest publishers dropped a book about malpractice at the Tavistock gender identity clinic, cancelled another contracted manuscript on the complex legacy of British Empire, and later sacked the editor who had supported both projects, reports the [Times](#) in an article that is now the subject of a legal complaint from Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Senior figures at Bloomsbury, which publishes JK Rowling's Harry Potter series, were initially enthusiastic about *Time to Think* – an exhaustive investigation into the NHS clinic – but the publisher is now facing claims that it decided not to proceed amid political advocacy from younger members of staff.

Details of what happened to the book have emerged following Bloomsbury's decision to dismiss Robin Baird-Smith, the experienced editor who championed the title.

Baird-Smith also invited Nigel Biggar, the FSU's Chair and Emeritus Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at the University of Oxford, to write *Colonialism – A Moral Reckoning*, which argues the British Empire was not all bad, but that Bloomsbury then cancelled, choosing to pay off the author instead of going ahead.

Despite *Colonialism – A Moral Reckoning* and *Time to Think* both becoming bestsellers elsewhere, Bloomsbury sacked Baird-Smith in March, with a source saying the company offered the eminent editor no explanation for why he was no longer wanted, something the company denies.

A source told the *Times* that during Baird-Smith's time at Bloomsbury, the group's Chief Executive, Nigel Newton, became tired of receiving "so many complaints" from junior employees about the books the editor wanted to publish that challenged left-wing political orthodoxy. "I think it was very annoying for him to have emails from junior members of staff all the time saying, 'you've got to stop this man [Baird-Smith] publishing these books'", the source said.

Newton also apparently insisted on attending and giving a speech at Baird-Smith's leaving party, but was heckled throughout by those who felt he "had been his assassin".

According to the *Times* the book about the Tavistock clinic had been approved by an executive at an editorial meeting and the company had agreed to make an offer to the author, Hannah Barnes. However, before that could happen, the project was killed off.

A source familiar with the situation said senior managers offered no explanation but added that around that time young staff were agitating to stop the company from publishing books that did not correspond with their political views.

Bloomsbury denies the book was approved for acquisition and says it was only considered for publication but that its risk committee, which is chaired by Newton, decided that the potential legal complications were not worth the projected sales.

It added that the opinions of younger members of staff had "absolutely no bearing" on the decision. Bloomsbury explained that the decision was made before the March 2022 publication of the interim report of the Cass Review into gender identity services, which was critical of the Tavistock clinic, and

which the publisher says changed the risk profile and sales potential of the book.

After being dropped by Bloomsbury, *Time to Think* was picked up by the small, independent publisher, Swift Press, and became a bestseller. It was also shortlisted for the highly regarded Baillie Gifford and Orwell prizes.

Prof Biggar's *Colonialism – A Moral Reckoning* challenges what Sherelle Jacobs [refers to as](#) the “Evil White Male” version of history, arguing that despite grave mistakes and moments of gross injustice, the British Empire learnt from its errors and was increasingly propelled by humanitarian and liberal ideals, most notably through the abolition and suppression of slavery. It also examines the work of a number of historians who Prof Biggar claims “overstate” the sins of British colonialism, concluding that they are sustained by contempt for the West. (Prof Biggar summarises the core argument of his book in an excellent piece for the *Critic* [here](#)).

The manuscript was delivered at the end of 2020. After reading it, Baird-Smith emailed Prof Biggar to say he was “speechless” with enthusiasm, and that “I consider this to be a book of major importance, certainly one of the most important on my life for some time. Your argument is conveyed with care and precision. I say again, this is such an important book.”

Three months later, however, Prof Biggar received an email from Sarah Broadway, the Head of Special Interest Publishing at the company, which said “conditions are not currently favourable to publication” and that she wanted to delay. According to the [Times](#), Prof Biggar asked Ms Broadway to clarify what she meant, and the following email exchange took place:

Ms Broadway: *“We consider that public feeling on the subject does not currently support the publication of the book and will reassess that next year.”*

Prof Biggar: *“Could you clarify for me, please: which public feeling concerns you; in what sense it is ‘unfavourable’ to publication; and what would need to change to make it ‘favourable’ again?”*

Ms Broadway: *Bloomsbury had “grappled with giving defined criteria” but found this “difficult to define objectively... we have concluded that this subjectivity could lead to your book being in a limbo lasting more than a year or it might not, but we don’t wish to put you in that position of uncertainty.”*

Prof Biggar: *“It is quite clear... the public feeling that concerns you is that of – for want of a more scientific term – the ‘woke’ Left. Rather than publish cogent arguments and important truths that would attract the aggression of these illiberals, you choose to align yourselves with them by de-platforming me. In so doing, you have made your own contribution to the expansion of authoritarianism and the shrinking of moral and political diversity.”*

Sadly, the *Times* doesn’t record Ms Broadway’s response to what, in the parlance of the boxing ring, would be called a ‘TKO’.

Following the decision to ‘postpone’ publication, Prof Biggar [revealed](#) that a source at the company told him senior executives pulled the plug because junior staff found the book’s conclusion – that colonialism wasn’t all bad – to be in poor taste.

Thankfully, however, the title was then picked up by William Collins, and became a bestseller. To date it has sold 60,000 copies.

Commenting on his book’s cancellation, Biggar said: “If every publisher behaved like Bloomsbury did with me, then important books that challenge received ideas that may be deeply mistaken won’t get published. And fallacious ideas will dominate our public discourse, as indeed they have been for some time on our history.”