

# The Order of The British Empire



PETER GALLOWAY

## THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

In 1993 the Officials of the Order of the British Empire decided to commission a history of the Order. The result was *The Order of the British Empire*, by Peter Galloway, published in 1996 to coincide with a Service of the Order in St Paul's Cathedral on 8 May 1996. It was a pioneering study of the debates that led to the institution of the Order, and the controversies that occurred in its earliest years.

This new and greatly expanded edition, also commissioned by the Officials of the Order, published in 2017 to mark the centenary of this most well-known national honour, incorporates the inevitable changes and developments that have occurred since 1996, not least the revival of the use of the British Empire Medal. This second edition provides much new material from the archives of the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood, the Royal Archives, the National Archives and the Cabinet Office Honours and Appointments Secretariat. In the early 1990s, the world-wide web was still in its relative infancy. Since that time, the increasing availability of on-line archival material has enabled almost immediate access to an immense universe of knowledge, including many illustrations otherwise difficult to locate. The British Newspaper Archive in particular, a valuable on-line tool for research, has enabled this new history of the Order to include diverse public reactions from sources once difficult to access and usually unindexed.

As much as its predecessor this book is the definitive and authoritative account of this national Order of the United Kingdom,

### **The Creation of the Order**

‘Of course any idea of medals or rewards is ridiculous at the present moment, but all sorts of crude schemes for new Decorations are being quietly discussed and I feel that unless we have some sort of idea of what we are going to do, we shall, when the end of the war is in sight, be swept off our legs by a rush for Decorations in all quarters.’ With those words of Sir Frederick Ponsonby in November 1915, there began eighteen months of work to create an honour that has grown to be one of the most familiar in the United Kingdom - The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. This first section of the book

covers the history of the Order from the first proposals at the end of 1915 to the present day, and discusses the often confused debates of 1916-17. The Order was the product of the conflict of the First World War, and the distracting demands of the war, the jostling interests of government departments, armed services and voluntary organisations, the repeated changes of mind by the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and his War Cabinet, and the reactions to the vast size of this new Order, ensured that it started life uncertainly.

### **The Insignia**

The original insignia featured the figure of Britannia, and its first ribbon was purple, with the addition of a red stripe for the military division. Queen Mary, who took a great interest in the Order from its beginning, had wanted the ribbon to be pink, but was overruled by King George V who held the view that it would get dirty in London! The Queen had to wait for nearly twenty years until, in 1936, she was appointed Grand Master, and changed the ribbon to her favourite rose-pink and pearl grey. Both the old pattern and the new pattern insignia, including the British Empire Medal and the robes and insignia of Knights and Dames Grand Cross, are fully illustrated by colour plates.

### **The Chapel**

The history of a quest to give the Order a chapel is replete with many suggestions and two serious but abortive attempts. St Paul's Cathedral was first suggested in 1917. St Margaret's Church, Westminster was seriously considered in 1938-39, but abandoned at the outbreak of the Second World War, partly because of difficulties with the House of Commons. In 1946-49 Southwark Cathedral was the subject of detailed negotiations, but the plan foundered because the only person to favour the building was Queen Mary. The establishment of a chapel at St Paul's Cathedral in 1957-60 was the culmination of a long architectural and spiritual odyssey.

### **The Appendices**

Complete lists of the Grand Masters and Officials and the substantive and honorary Knights and Dames Grand Cross were published in the

1996 edition. The lists are complete to the summer of 2017, and now more clearly demarcate membership of the civil and military divisions. An additional appendix provides a list of forfeitures.

### **The Author**

Peter Galloway is a graduate in history of Goldsmiths College, London, and did postgraduate research at King's College, London. In recent years he has specialised in the history and development of state honours. His publications include *The Order of St Patrick 1783-1983* (1983), *Good and faithful servants* (1988), *The Cathedrals of Ireland* (1992), a history of the Royal Victorian Order, in *Royal Service* (1996), *The Order of the British Empire* (1996), *A Passionate Humility* (1999), *The Most Illustrious Order* (1999), *The Cathedrals of Scotland* (2000), *The Order of St Michael and St George* (2000), *Companions of Honour* (2002), *The Order of the Bath* (2006), *The Order of the Thistle* (2009), *Exalted, Eminent and Imperial: Honours of the British Raj* (2014) and *The Royal Victorian Order* (2016). He was awarded the degree of DLitt, honoris causa, by Brunel University in 2008.

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