

# RUBY LECTURES

## IN COMMEMORATION OF

## THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY



# H K B U

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### About the Speaker

Professor Stuart Ward is head of the Saxo Institute for History, Ethnology, Archaeology and Classics at the University of Copenhagen. He specializes in the field of European imperial history, especially settler colonialism and the legacies of the imperial past. He has published three major books on Australia at empire's end: *Australia and the British Embrace* (2001); *The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire* (with James Curran, 2010) and the Australian volume of the Oxford History of the British Empire series, *Australia's Empire* (co-edited with Deryck Schreuder, 2008). Additionally, he has published widely on the legacies of empire in post-war Britain and Europe including *British Culture and the End of Empire* (ed. 2001) and *Exhuming Passions* (ed. 2011) as well as a wide range of journal articles. His current research project is 'Embers of Empire: The Receding Frontiers of Post-imperial Britain' ([www.embersofempire.ku.dk](http://www.embersofempire.ku.dk)) which is also the theme of a new monograph soon to be published by Cambridge University Press. He currently serves as Provost of Denmark's oldest residential university college, Regensen.



## 'Empires of the Mind': The Imperial Past in Brexit Britain

### Professor Stuart James WARD (The University of Copenhagen)



September 11, 2018 (Tuesday)



9:30 am - 11:20 am



Mrs Padma Harilela Lecture  
Theatre (WLB104), Lam Woo  
International Conference Centre,  
Renfrew Road, Kowloon Tong



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### Abstract

As the United Kingdom haggles its way out of the European Union and casts about for alternative futures, it is widely assumed that the imperial past has much to answer for – with Brexit derided variously as a 'pining for empire' (Pankaj Mishra); 'England's Last Gasp of Empire' (Ben Judah), and the prelude to 'Empire 2.0'. This is not just a matter of unrepentant Remainers resorting to easy political put-downs, but also registers in the rhetoric of the Brexiters themselves. Boris Johnson's Churchillian vision of British 'Empires of the mind' is but one of several instances where Britain's imperial track record has been invoked to inspire confidence in a post-Brexit future, beckoning a divided nation back into the world. At the same time, the future of Britain itself has increasingly become a source of speculation in the light of the intractable 'border problem' in Northern Ireland and the looming threat of a second Scottish independence referendum. Britain's perceived failure to divest itself of worldly delusions is frequently diagnosed as the root cause of these multiple challenges, though it is rarely established beyond vague gesturing to 'ghosts', 'hangovers' and periodic bouts of 'nostalgia'. This lecture considers how we might place the end of empire and Brexit Britain in the same analytical frame – by reconceptualising the idea of Britain and Britishness as global categories of analysis – indeed, as ideas that were radically adapted to the global dispersal of British people, capital, goods and culture from the 18th to the 20th centuries. If Britain was the world's first global civic idea, called on to do more identity work across unprecedented distances than anything before or since, it is worth asking what unique pressures were brought to bear when 'Greater Britain' struck heavy weather in the age of global decolonization. In particular, how did the loss of confidence in Britishness abroad influence contemporaneous developments in the United Kingdom? The lecture will point towards a new history of Britain's imperial past in the light of the Brexit present.