

British Overseas Expansion, 1815-1880

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This chapter traces the outlines of British overseas expansion during the crucial years between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the beginning of the Scramble for Africa. During this period, the British empire, and Britain itself, underwent changes that, for some historians at least, added up to a fundamental transformation. The chapter examines how contemporaries and historians applied ideas about 'tradition' and 'modernity' to describe and understand these developments.

For Britain, the 19th century saw a transition, albeit gradual and incomplete, from a society managed by an aristocratic 'fiscal-military' state to one in which middle class groups at least had some say in the running of the country, and were able to effect a shift towards the emergence of a *laissez faire* state. These transitions in political culture and the nature of state power were mirrored in the changes that occurred in the 'second' British empire that emerged from the Napoleonic Wars. Initially run by authoritarian, aristocratic, interventionist colonial states, by the mid-19th century greater emphasis was being placed on gaining the collaboration and consent of at least sections of the local population. In the White settler colonies, local communities of Europeans were gradually granted powers of self-government, while in the tropical dependencies indigenous elites were drawn into structures of government.

All this was under-girded by a broader transition in the political economy of British overseas expansion, as the old mercantilist system was gradually abandoned in favour of free trade. As British officials and statesmen came to envisage the creation of a world economy capable of drawing even the remotest parts of the world into a system of global exchange, the flow of British goods, capital and people to the rest of the world massively increased. The results, for 'formal' colonies, 'informal' colonies subject to economic imperialism, and for Britain herself, were varied, and are difficult to assess even with the benefit of hindsight.

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INTRODUCTION

For many 19th-century British writers, drawn from an elite that had enjoyed a classical education and the benefits of foreign travel, British overseas expansion was clearly part of an older tradition of European empire building. They traced this back to classical Greece and Rome, Spanish and Portuguese expansion following Columbus' voyages to the New World, and 17th- and 18th-century European conflict over colonial possessions in Asia, America and

the Caribbean. The Cambridge historian Sir John Seeley, in his classic study *The expansion of England* (1883), presented the British empire as emerging from this broader process of conquest and competition. C.P. Lucas, under-secretary of state at the Colonial Office, explicitly compared the ancient and modern empires in his *Greater Rome and Greater Britain* (1912). Lucas, like many others of his generation, was intrigued by the question of whether the British empire would collapse as its forebears had. Earlier, the travel writer Anthony Trollope had even pictured a New Zealander, perched on the remains of London Bridge, surveying the Coliseum-like ruins of a future London.

Others wondered, however, if there was something essentially new about Britain's 19th-century overseas expansion, something intrinsically modern that differentiated it from the traditional experience of empire-building. Reflecting the broader Victorian ethos of progress, some believed that economic, demographic and technological change had created a uniquely powerful and durable imperial structure. As Sir Sandford Fleming, engineer-in-chief of the Canadian Pacific Railway, wrote in 1907:

At an earlier period of the world's history it would have been difficult to conceive the possibility of any lasting political union between countries so widely separated by intervening seas. The problem is, however, being solved not by old methods, but by the application of wise principles of government, aided in a wonderful way by the highest resources of modern science. Steam has made the separating oceans no longer barriers, but the general medium of union. Electricity has furnished the means by which the British people in all parts of the globe may exchange thought as freely as those within speaking distance.

These conflicting interpretations of 19th-century British overseas expansion, as something with a long tradition on the one hand, and essentially modern on the other, also affected how subsequent commentators sought to explain the imperial phenomenon. For Joseph Schumpeter, overseas expansion was linked to the survival of traditional, aristocratic elites from an earlier age. These groups, interested in war, conquest and exclusive, tariff-protected trade, supposedly drew Western powers, including Britain, into overseas expansion. For other writers, notably the British radical Liberal J.A. Hobson, empire was championed rather by modern elements in society, notably parasitic industrial and financial interest groups seeking protected overseas outlets for surplus goods and investment capital.

The themes of tradition and modernity were also taken up by later historians. Most recently, David Cannadine has restated and refined Schumpeter's theory, examining the ideology and ceremony of empire and rooting overseas expansion firmly in an aristocratic milieu. Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins have meanwhile sought to provide a subtler reworking of the ideas of both Schumpeter and Hobson, arguing that British imperialism reflected a particular fusion of tradition and modernity. For Cain and Hopkins, Britain was from at least the 17th century onwards dominated by a 'gentlemanly capitalist' elite, a fusion of agrarian and financial/service-sector bourgeois interests. This elite used empire to cement its domestic hegemony.

THE BRITISH IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

While notoriously vague and infuriatingly difficult to define, the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity' are thus invaluable to any discussion of British overseas expansion in the 19th

century. They are particularly useful if one acknowledges that during this period, neither Britain nor any part of the British empire saw a simple transition from a state of tradition to one of modernity. Rather, Britain and her colonies continued simultaneously to display elements of both.

Since the mid-18th century, Britain had been undergoing the world's first industrial revolution. The implementation of a range of new technologies and production techniques had allowed manufacturing industry to realise previously unimaginable economies of scale. Industrial growth brought with it a whole host of changes, in particular facilitating the emergence of a class of wealthy middle-class entrepreneurs, the movement of large numbers of labourers away from the countryside to work in the new factories and the development of large industrial cities to contain them, particularly in northern England. At the same time, a vibrant service sector achieved a new predominance, focused in the south-east of England and, in particular, in the City of London.

However, despite this rapid modernisation, Britain remained politically, economically, socially and culturally dominated by a traditional, aristocratic ruling class. This group drew its power not from industry but from great landed estates. Britain remained an *ancien régime*, a monarchy run by a hereditary elite in the interests of land and the aristocracy. Indeed, during the 18th and early 19th century, this elite seemed to strengthen its hold on power, developing a stronger form of government since dubbed by historians as a 'fiscal-military' state. The state was 'fiscal' because it was able to control and spend an unprecedented proportion of its inhabitants' wealth. Taxation increased until, by the early 19th century, the British had become the most heavily-taxed people in Europe. The government was also able to raise loans at unprecedentedly low interest rates, due partly to the establishment of the Bank of England in 1694. Guaranteed repayment of the new 'national debt' meant that interest rates for government loans fell from 9% in 1688 to 5% by 1815. The state meanwhile also became 'military', as it spent most of the money raised on the army and the navy. During the wars of the 18th and early 19th centuries, Britain spent on average over 85% of state revenue on the military.

The power of the new fiscal-military state was in many ways concentrated in England, allowing the English state to expand into Ireland, Scotland and Wales during the 17th and 18th centuries. This certainly produced resistance and hostility, but also generated a more genuinely 'British' entity and identity that in turn influenced the character, and particularly the ideology, of subsequent overseas expansion.

The fiscal-military state was meanwhile exported and used to help rally colonial resources and establish British commercial and martial predominance. Controlling the empire from London on an everyday basis was impractical, given the limits of early-19th century communications technology, and undesirable, given the substantial cost to the British state that direct rule would have entailed. Instead, the size of the central imperial administration remained restricted throughout the 19th century. Between 1782 and 1801, colonial affairs were co-ordinated by the British Home Office. Even when a Colonial Office was established to take over these duties, it remained under-resourced and under-staffed. By 1812, there were only seventeen permanent officials working at the Colonial Office, with seven assistants.



Fig. 1
The British empire, 1815-1914.

Much of the day-to-day work of colonial administration was thus handed over to colonial states set up 'on the ground' in each colony and sustained by revenues drawn from local trade and taxation. These were essentially miniature fiscal-military states, headed by autocratic, aristocratic imperial governors, many of whom had come from military backgrounds. They were supported administratively by cadres of officials drawn from the British aristocracy, and ideologically by a culture of imperial splendour, monarchical glory and military heroism. Religious, patriotic and racial beliefs merged, feeding into and drawing on growing Anglican Protestant missionary zeal. Not only could the emerging imperial ideology of the British as a 'governing race' be used to impress the legitimacy of British imperial authority upon conquered peoples, but it could also help demonstrate to the middle and working classes back in Britain that the aristocracy were running a successful and glorious state. Moreover, a sense of imperial Britishness could help convince Scots, Welsh and Irish that they were living in a country that offered them opportunities for advancement and glory overseas. Indigenous peoples provided an 'other' against whom the diverse peoples of the UK could define themselves and unite.

Once acquired for export, the resources of the colonies were bound into an overarching imperial structure of trade through a system of restrictive regulations known as the 'old colonial system'. This was part of a broader system of mercantilism, by which the British government sought to control the economy and its relations with the outside world through a host of laws, regulations and protective tariffs, including the Navigation Acts.

While the nature of the British empire in the early 19th century thus reflected the character of Britain's fiscal-military state, the geographical dimensions of the empire during this period were similarly shaped by war. By 1815, all of the European empires had been decisively transformed by the preceding decades of global conflict. For Britain, the loss of the Thirteen Colonies in North America, and the acquisition of new dependencies in India and the Pacific, shifted the centre of the empire's gravity eastwards, creating what some have called the 'second' British empire. While important and substantial territories remained in the Caribbean and British North America (modern Canada), new colonies at the Cape of Good Hope (in modern South Africa) and in India and Australia, altered both the shape and the character of the British overseas empire. Crucially, tensions between traditional and modern elements in British society were replicated in the colonies.

In British settler colonies, conflict resulted from attempts to fasten traditional, aristocratic economic, social and political systems onto local communities. In British North America, governors sought to reinforce their authority over the peoples of the St Lawrence region by establishing a new, Anglicised, Protestant landowning elite. This was strongly resisted however, both by those members of the existing English-speaking settler population who feared exclusion, and by French Canadians who worried that they would be swamped by an influx of new arrivals. In 1837, resistance culminated in rebellion in Lower and Upper Canada.

At the Cape of Good Hope, following the British takeover from the Dutch in 1806, military force was used to support settler encroachment onto the land of indigenous Africans. The colonial state also encouraged White settlement as a means of forcing African labour into the urban and rural economies of the Cape. However, less welcome, to Dutch settlers at least, were attempts to create a more market-oriented society. African slave labour was brought to an end, and a British settler elite was cultivated to help manage the new sheep-farming economy. In response, 15,000 of the poorer Dutch farmers of the Eastern Cape undertook the so-called 'Great Trek' of the 1830s into the interior. British authority followed these migrants into their new Republic of Natalia, established in 1838 and annexed by the British five years later to become the colony of Natal. Dissidents as a result trekked further into the interior, founding the two 'Boer' republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State.

In Australia, settlements initially designed as receptacles for British convicts also began to develop their own internal tensions, as officials and settlers began to utilise convict labour in order to build up their own bases of agricultural power. Individuals used their official powers to cement their private economic dominance. Many members of the new elite were drawn from the New South Wales Corps, the military force that kept order in the convict settlements. By 1801 John Macarthur, the paymaster of the New South Wales Corps, owned over 1000 hectares of land and over 1000 sheep. Such men increasingly clashed with the British governors, culminating in mutiny against Governor Bligh (who had previously experienced similar misfortune as captain of *The Bounty*) in 1808. Subsequently, New South Wales would experience growing conflict between those who continued to see the colony as a place for convicts, and those who wished it to become a modern settler society developing along the lines suggested by thinkers such as Edward Gibbon Wakefield.

Tension between tradition and modernity was similarly pronounced in India, the most important of Britain's non-settler tropical dependencies. The 18th century had seen a dramatic increase in British involvement in the affairs of the sub-continent and an expansion of the activities of the East India Company (the chartered company that enjoyed a monopoly of official trade between Britain and India and the Far East). This was in part the result of the activities of Company employees engaged in illicit 'private trade'. As these men sought to make their own fortunes, they helped destabilise the already shaky hegemony exerted by the Muslim Mughal empire. This was compounded by the impact of the 18th-century wars between Britain and France. Partly fought out in India, these conflicts provided the East India Company with improved access to supporting British military force. In order to pay its military bills, the Company began to claim sovereignty over parts of India and collect tax revenues from local peasants. As a result it transformed itself from a commercial venture into an organ of imperial government. By 1815 the Company controlled all of eastern India, most of the peninsula, and a large part of the Ganges valley. It was also able to exert its dominance over large Indian states like Hyderabad and Oudh.

Initially at least, East India Company rule was authoritarian and militarised. Civil, military and judicial functions remained concentrated in the hands of army officers, many of whom had served in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Soldiers were used for revenue collection duties and at times used torture to aid the process, a practice euphemistically known as 'martial force'. Revenue collection became both the means of and the reason for maintaining a sizeable Company army, composed mainly of indigenous Indian troops or 'sepoys' – 235,000 of them by the mid-1820s. The military was also used to support Company attempts to increase revenue by forcing more and more Indians into settled peasant agriculture. Itinerant peoples such as redundant mercenary soldiers, armed travelling traders and non-settled tribal groups were thus forcibly settled or eliminated, encouraging the 'peasantisation' of the Indian economy, a process also facilitated by the collaboration of traditional elite groups in Indian society. The Company justified its draconian regime with the argument that Asian peoples were used to 'oriental despotism', and thus had to be governed in an authoritarian manner.

It is important to note, however, that there was also a modernising or 'humanitarian' strand to British involvement in India in the first half of the 19th century. This drew in particular on the principles of 'trusteeship' set down in the 1780s by Edmund Burke in the British parliament, during fierce debates over the worst excesses of Company rule. Burke argued that 'all political power which is set over men ... ought to be some way or other exercised for their benefit', and that the British had a duty to hold power in trust until those governed were able to govern themselves. Humanitarian sentiment generated substantial criticism of Company rule in India, and led to calls for the creation of an enlightened political structure that would dispense with 'oriental despotism'. According to humanitarians, Britain had an obligation to 'civilise' India, bringing the supposed benefits of modern Western society. During the later 1840s and especially during the 1850s these ideas gained pace under the Governor Generalship of Lord Dalhousie (1846-56).



Fig. 2
Print of Indian havildar and sepoy by I.C. Stadler after Charles Hamilton Smith, published 1 March 1815.

IMPERIAL CRISES AND REFORM

For tensions in the colonies to be resolved, change would first have to come in Britain. There was no great mid-19th-century colonial revolt, akin to the 18th-century American Revolution. Rather reforms generally proceeded slowly in the colonies, at an uneven rate, in the wake of broader transformations in the nature of the British economic and political system.

In Britain and Ireland, resistance to the growing power of the fiscal-military state had been brewing throughout the Napoleonic Wars, and intensified during the period of economic hardship and political repression that followed. In particular, attempts by agrarian aristocratic elites to use their political power to protect personal economic interests attracted growing criticism. This formed part of the broader assault on 'old corruption', the label attached by radicals to the seemingly arbitrary and profligate system of aristocratic government. It also fed into criticism of the Corn Laws of 1815 and 1828, tariff barriers designed to protect agrarian incomes by excluding cheap foreign grain. These clearly acted against the interests of middle- and working-class urban groups, resulting in higher food prices and, consequently, inflated wages.

Growing resistance to the Corn Laws was organised by the predominantly working class

Chartist movement on the one hand, and by the middle-class Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL, founded 1839) on the other. While Chartists sought profound political changes that would in turn facilitate the alteration of economic policies, the ACLL launched a more targeted campaign aimed at replacing the agrarian-oriented protectionist system with a free trade framework that would benefit industry. Such reform proved acceptable to an aristocratic elite increasingly aware of the need to prevent a social revolution by undertaking timely reform that would purge the system of its most objectionable features while leaving underlying structures intact. Robert Peel's government thus repealed the Corn Laws in 1846.

Repeal of the Corn Laws coincided with a broader movement towards free trade and the dismantling of the mercantilist 'old colonial system'. Throughout the 1840s, regulations were relaxed and restrictions removed, culminating in the repeal of the Navigation Acts in 1849. For some historians, the result was a period of mid-Victorian anti-imperialism. The radical rhetoric that accompanied the free trade movement envisaged the creation of a modern world in which goods, people and capital would flow around the globe unimpeded. Regions would specialise in producing those goods or raw materials in which they enjoyed a comparative advantage, and peacefully exchange the surplus with other regions to bring in efficiently produced imports. In such a pacific world order, there would be no need for colonies or imperial conquest.

As has largely been accepted since the 1950s, however, this radical free trade rhetoric had little impact upon practical policy. Far from inaugurating a period of anti-imperialism, free trade was central to the projection of British economic power into far-flung corners of the globe. The free movement of goods, money and people around the world allowed a level of overseas economic penetration unimagined in the mercantilist period. In the process, tools of influence and coercion were used to tie many parts of the world into relationships that proved imperial in all but name.

In 1824 the British Foreign Secretary, George Canning, famously wrote to a colleague that 'Spanish America is free and if we do not mismanage our affairs sadly, she is English'. This reflected the contemporary belief that a dynamic British manufacturing economy would inevitably draw peripheral areas into its orbit. A policy of free trade would allow Britain to exploit this tendency to the full, with early industrialisation making it possible to out-compete all potential rivals and create the 'first global economy', shaped so as to serve Britain's best interests. Britain would as a result be able to export its manufactured goods to other countries, thereby increasing demand for British products and also paying for vital imports of food and raw materials. Victorian British statesmen claimed that this would not only benefit the UK, but would also bring progress and civilisation to the rest of the world. A moral sense of world mission thus harmonised with material self-interest.

Over the decades that followed, Britain became the focus for complex flows of investment, trade and migration. By the late 1860s, Britain was exporting £40m of capital per annum, rising to £130m per annum by the turn of the century. By 1880, Britain also accounted for 41.4% of world manufacturing exports, and was importing vast amounts of food, raw materials and finished products. Huge numbers of migrants meanwhile left Britain for extra-European destinations, an average net outward movement of almost 200,000 per annum by

the early 1880s. Non-White peoples were also becoming increasingly internationally mobile. Between 1834 and 1920, almost one and a half million indentured migrants left British colonies for destinations within the empire. At the same time, Britain was able to develop colonial 'bridgeheads' that allowed the expansion of trade and influence in far-flung corners of the globe. Enclaves such as Singapore in the Far East and Freetown in West Africa became co-ordinating bases for regional economic and political penetration.

However, the expansive forces unleashed by the dramatic mid-19th century growth of the British economy always exceeded the bounds of Britain's 'formal' empire, the areas where Britain had established colonial states. In terms of investment, the period between 1865 and 1915 saw 42% of British capital being exported to foreign countries, and only 25% to the empire (only 20% for the period before 1900). Similarly, while the colonies of settlement became increasingly important sources of imports for Britain during the 19th century, growth of trade with Europe was even more rapid, and Africa and Asia provided a shrinking proportion of British imports. Most migrants from Britain travelled to non-empire destinations (around two-thirds to the USA).

A great deal of this foreign trade, investment and migration involved destinations that could by no means be seen to be in an imperial or colonial relationship with Britain. However, in some areas Britain became such an important economic presence that, for some historians, economic imperialism occurred despite the absence of a 'formal' constitutional link. The idea of 'informal' empire became increasingly popular as a tool of historical analysis following the path-finding work of Robinson and Gallagher in the 1950s. According to this influential interpretation, economic influence, backed up by varying degrees of diplomatic and military force (ranging from free trade treaties in Latin America to treaty ports and gunboat diplomacy in China) allowed Britain to develop varying forms of imperial relationship with areas that remained notionally independent.

In those areas that did become formal colonies of the British empire, economic transformation was managed by colonial states that differed markedly from their early-19th century forebears. This was a further consequence of the mid-19th-century transformation of British political culture, which had brought about not just free trade but also the emergence of the *laissez faire* state. As 'old corruption' was pruned back, state expenditure fell dramatically – by 1851, British per capita government spending was down to two-thirds of its 1781 total. The state also began to take on more of the symbols of modern bureaucratic efficiency. Corrupt pensions and payments were eliminated, strict salary scales for public servants were imposed, and centralisation proceeded apace.

This had serious consequences for the colonial state, as sinecures were swept away and new modes of governance imposed. Efficient, parsimonious colonial government became the aim of British officials, even if the ideal of bureaucratic rationality was seldom achieved in reality. In London, Victorian retrenchment kept the Colonial Office small. Indeed, so little money was spent on the Colonial Office that in 1839 its buildings were condemned. The colonial states that were maintained on the ground in the colonies developed along similarly parsimonious lines. During the 1880s the empire was managed by fewer than 6,000 officials.

This was achieved largely through the devolution of powers of government to local collaborators. In the colonies of White settlement, this was facilitated by a significant, if grad-

ual, transformation of political culture, with the granting of 'responsible self-government'. It was long argued that the colonies themselves set the pace here, with change being precipitated by the rebellions that broke out in Upper and Lower Canada in 1837. An attempt by the French Canadian leader, Louis Joseph Papineau, to wrest control of government expenditure from the Governor and his appointed council led to a crisis, culminating in rebellion and repression. Lord Durham subsequently travelled from Britain to Canada to enquire into the matter, and on his return produced a *Report on the Affairs of British North America*, also known as the Durham Report, which recommended the unification of Upper and Lower Canada and the granting of greater autonomy in local government. Earlier generations of imperial historians allotted the report a central place in the evolution of the principle of self-government. In the 1970s, however, revisionist work questioned the importance of the report, and preferred to link the emergence of responsible government in the Dominions to the development of the principle in Britain itself. It was only once the British parliament finally asserted its predominance over the Crown during the 1840s that ministries drawn from locally elected settler assemblies could replace imperial governors at the centre of colonial legislative systems. This transition was eased by a growing sense that the colonies of settlement, as essentially 'British' communities linked to the UK by mutual interest and a common culture, could be granted control over their own affairs without endangering the underlying imperial bond.

Responsible self-government was not extended to the crown colonies or tropical dependencies, where British imperial officials continued to manage the affairs of non-White peoples. In India, the politically modernising tendencies of the 1840s and 1850s were curtailed by the brutal Mutiny and Rebellion and subsequent British repression of 1857. Like contemporaries, historians have differed as to whether the Mutiny was a response to 'traditionalisation' or 'modernisation'. Some would argue that rebellion was a response to autocracy, peasantry and impoverishment, an attempt by Indian society to prevent itself being further 'traditionalised'. Others would argue, however, that the Mutiny was a response to the increasingly modernising thrust of British rule, a backward-looking struggle led by privileged landed elite groups and strengthened by religious millenarianism. *Sepoys*, disillusioned by attempts to modernise the army, and native rulers such as Nana Sahib of Oudh and the Rani of Jhansi, combined in a reactionary revolt precipitated by the emblematic issue of the refusal of Muslim and Hindu soldiers to use ammunition greased with cow and pig fat.

The Mutiny seriously shook British confidence in a modernising agenda, demonstrating the shallowness of Indian commitment to British, Western values. Coinciding with a period of broader disillusionment as to the capacity of indigenous peoples for reform, the period after the Mutiny saw the introduction of more conservative policies. In 1858 the Government of India Act ended Company rule and turned India into a full colony of Britain. India was subsequently ruled by powerful Governors, or Viceroy, assisted by appointed Councils of Europeans and a conservative Indian Civil Service. The military was scaled back, but the proportion of European to Indian troops was increased. Pre-Mutiny collaboration with Western-educated Hindu elites was reduced, and instead the British came to rely even more on the co-operation of Indian princes. The British Raj in India remained markedly monarchical and hierarchical in tone. Responsible self-government seemed a very remote possibility.

THE IMPACT OF BRITISH OVERSEAS EXPANSION

Much of the debate over the impact of overseas expansion, both on Britain and her colonies, revolves around the issue of whether it encouraged economies to develop along traditional or modern lines. In the case of Britain itself, debate about the costs and benefits of empire has become entwined with attempts to explain 20th-century relative economic decline. For some, the excessive movement of capital overseas into low-return colonial investments starved the British manufacturing sector of the funds needed to modernise and compete with German and American competition. For others, imperial markets provided a cushion, allowing British firms to continue inefficient production for captive colonial markets. Some of the force has been taken out of this debate, however, by the realisation that empire in fact accounted for a relatively minor proportion of British overseas trade, important for certain sectors of the economy certainly, but not enough to have a generally transforming influence on the British economy.

The economic impact of British expansion on the rest of the world is even more difficult to gauge. In some cases, the imperial connection did bring prosperity to colonial societies. Certain key regional enclaves of British power achieved startling levels of urbanisation and modernisation, as in the case of Singapore. It was White settlers who benefited most from the prosperity that empire could bring, however. Substantial flows of capital, goods and people to places like Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa created 'neo-European' economies in which settlers enjoyed extraordinarily high standards of living. The losers were indigenous peoples, who were either marginalized as a result of attempts to create capitalist, export-oriented economies, or consigned to subordinate positions as providers of cheap labour.

In other areas, the imperial link certainly was not enough to guarantee prosperity. Some parts of the British empire entered into a marked economic decline during the 19th century, notably the sugar-producing colonial economies of the Caribbean. In 1815 the Caribbean accounted for 20% of British exports and imports. By the 1850s this proportion had declined catastrophically to 5%. This was the result of the combination of the humanitarian campaign that culminated in the abolition of slavery, and the movement to an empire of free trade, which exposed the previously protected Caribbean economies to the cold logic of a capitalist world economy in which they could not compete with other more efficient producers. This had clear political ramifications. By the 1870s, all of the Caribbean colonies, with the exception of Barbados, had decided to dissolve colonial assemblies and adopt crown colony status instead. Confident imperial modernisers were presented with the somewhat distasteful spectacle of colonies moving backwards along the scale of colonial government.

What is less clear is whether the imperial link merely failed to bring growth, or whether it actively undermined the possibilities of colonial economies to generate sustained local prosperity. This is true of the debate over the impact of empire on Britain's African and Asian colonies, and also of attempts to examine how far British 'informal' empire in Latin America, China and elsewhere affected local economic fortunes. It is important to note that, while mid-Victorians free traders might have envisaged a world in which untrammelled British commercial influence decisively transformed every corner of the globe, cre-

ating a fully integrated international economy, the actual effects of British economic influence were far more limited. The volume of international trade in the mid-19th century remained relatively small, and in areas such as Latin America and China restricted purchasing power and poor communications infrastructures combined with the continuing strength of indigenous producers, traders and politicians to frustrate British designs. The resources available to free trade imperialists were simply too limited to bring about any drastic transformation of colonial economies during the 19th or 20th centuries, as would become clear in the wake of the Scramble for Africa in the 1880s and 1890s. The impact of British overseas expansion was insufficient in itself to account either for the continuance of tradition or the onset of modernity, in Britain or its colonies.



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Extract from: Sydney Smith Bell, *Colonial Administration of Great Britain*, London 1859, pp. 1-7.

The Past and Present Administration of the British Colonies.

Introduction

No sovereign, ancient or modern, ever possessed dominions so extensive as those over which the Queen of Great Britain reigns; and no nation, ancient or modern, had more just reason to be proud of its acquisitions than the British nation has, both as to the mode in which the acquisitions have been gained, and as to the character in which they have been governed. However equivocal may have been the motives with which Great Britain, like other nations of that period, set out for the discovery of the western hemisphere, or with which some of her people, for their own individual benefit, took the first steps, which have resulted in her vast empire in the eastern hemisphere, it is through the active industry and persevering activity of her inhabitants that she has acquired by far the greater part of her dependencies throughout the earth.

Extension of commerce, spreading the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, and diffusing the blessings of civilized life, by just, equal, and enlightened principles of government, has been the character in which Great Britain has undoubtedly ruled her acquisitions, although, through inherent defects in her system of colonial administration, she may occasionally have miscarried in some of these respects.

Yet, with all this reason for just pride and exultation, there may be reason why we should pause in our career of glory, and reflect whether this very extent of our dominions is a source of true power, or is not rather one of positive weakness, the forerunner of decay and ultimate dissolution; whether our empire, like those which have preceded it, from Nimrod's downwards, has not attained that culminating point in its power, whence it must descend, ultimately to sink below the horizon, like the empires of antiquity; whether treating the empire as arborists do trees of excessive luxuriance, it would not be wise to lop and prune it to the very stem, in order to stop the diffusion of sap through too distant extremities, and thereby preserve its vigor and ensure the prolongation of its vitality.

Though it be true that the colonial dependencies of Great Britain have been ruled by able, virtuous, and enlightened statesmen; though it be true that the broad system of her colonial polity has been untainted by selfishness, however individuals may have turned the workings of that system to their own profit; though Great Britain, including her colonial dependencies, is governed by the accumulated wisdom of many senators, and is not, like other countries less kindly dealt with by Providence, ruled after the arbitrary will of an individual sovereign: yet, if we do not go into the details, but confine ourselves to a general survey of results, it would seem as if these are little better than they would have been had our colonial administration been dictated by an ignorant, capricious, prejudiced, and narrow-minded sovereign.

We recognize in the nations of Europe the distinctions of race, and we are justly proud of our Saxon blood, and the ardent love of freedom and independence shown by the nations in whose veins it flows. But in our intercourse with our colonies – with those limited bodies of our fellow-countrymen who have gone out from us to found for themselves new states – we have ignored our origin, and treated them as if we and they were sprung from eastern races, instead of being, one and all of us, the sons of freedom.

It is true that a change has lately shown itself in our colonial, as in our commercial, policy, attributable, probably, to the superior enlightenment of modern politicians in the principles of political economy, and especially to the magnanimity and modest propriety of our present noble sovereign, who has not allowed any petty, personal feeling to interfere with what her ministers have represented to her as necessary to the proper government of her empire, who,

if she have the lust of dominion and the love of power, vices inherent almost universally in human nature, has wisely and nobly subdued them, and made her own happiness dependent on promoting the happiness of her subjects – the true aim of a wise and virtuous sovereign.

But it seems very doubtful whether this change in our colonial policy is universal, reaching to all its points; for it does not seem to spring from scientific and philosophical principles of government, which, being wrought out to their legitimate conclusions, will be certain to produce the end apparently desired. The motley character of our colonial government, when we consider the constitution accorded to one colony, as compared with those which have been imposed upon others, puzzles the mind to discover on what principle the differences are founded, and leads it rather to the conclusion that the force of circumstances was the true motive for whatever has been done in each particular case.

Yet, if it be so, one cannot blame those to whom our colonial destinies have been entrusted, from time to time. If all the beneficial changes in our colonial policy, which have undoubtedly been made of late years, bear the character of experiment rather than of experience – if they have more of empiricism in them than of scientific knowledge, the fault is attributable to the system of our colonial administration, rather than to the colonial minister, or those by whom he is assisted in his Herculean labor of governing fifty-four colonies, *i.e.*, of being sovereign of as many states, for such, in fact, he is.

The object of this work will be to give a bird's-eye view of our past colonial history, and thence to deduce the principles which would seem to be those that ought to guide us in our future colonial policy. The time was, and not long since, when it would have been vain to attempt such a deduction, with any expectation that it would prove acceptable to the public, or, perhaps, even to the minister. Not ten short years ago, it was the almost universal doctrine, that Great Britain owed her wealth, prosperity, and grandeur to her trade, and her trade to her navigation laws and system of differential duties. So long as this delusion prevailed, it would have been hopeless to broach any doctrine which seemed to have a tendency to loosen the tight hold which, with similar delusion, we thought we should ever retain over our colonies, by the mode in which we then administered them. Now that the film has fallen from the political eye, so far as to permit it to discover that Great Britain has achieved her unprecedented position amongst the nations of the earth, not in consequence, but in spite, of her navigation laws and differential duties, an attempt to show that the liberal character – which has undoubtedly marked our colonial administration during these few years past – may be pursued to a much greater extent without injury, but, on the contrary, with benefit to the empire, seems neither to be presumptuous nor likely to be an unthankful task. For, without doubt, notwithstanding the liberal tendency of our present colonial administration, there are looming in the political horizon very delicate and nice questions, between Great Britain and her colonies, arising out of her sovereignty over them, which it will be well for her to consider, before the time come when they may have to be solved by the sword instead of the pen.

The extent of the sovereign power of the Crown, or of the united legislature, over the colonies has often been asserted at home, and has as often been questioned in the colonies. This subject has necessarily been much mixed up with the discussions, parliamentary and diplomatic, which have from time to time arisen in regard to our trade regulations with the colonies; and, more lately still, in those which have occurred in regard to the constitutions to be conferred upon particular colonies. But the subject does not appear to have been probed to its depth. In Great Britain, the right has always been asserted, while its non-exercise has been conceded whenever the right was seriously questioned; and no one of its assertors has ever ventured to lay bare the principles upon which the right is supposed to be founded. The right has always been assumed, but has never been demonstrated. The time seems to have arrived when this

question should be candidly, but fearlessly, discussed.









