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# The British Empire

Amy J. Lloyd

University of Cambridge

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During the nineteenth century, the British Empire expanded greatly in terms of size, population and wealth. By the end of the century—which has been termed 'Britain's Imperial century'—the Empire covered approximately one-quarter of the world's land surface and governed around one-fifth of its population. It is not surprising, therefore, that news and discussion about and from Britain's sprawling Empire was an ever-present feature in much of the newspaper press. This essay will attempt to put this news in context, outlining the history of the British Empire during the nineteenth century and in particular examining the effects the Empire had on Britain and its home population.

### **The British Empire at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century**

Although Britain had lost thirteen of its North American colonies in the early 1780s, it still retained a vast and varied collection of colonies at the close of the eighteenth century. First, it had not lost all of its colonies in North America, retaining Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Quebec. It also had a penal colony called New South Wales on the continent of Australia that had been founded in 1788 to provide a "dumping-ground" for British criminals. Britain moreover had several colonies in the West Indies, including Barbados and Jamaica, a settlement at Sierra Leone and various trading posts in West Africa. In 1795, in the midst of the French Revolutionary Wars, it had also seized the Cape Colony from the Dutch for strategic reasons. Finally, British territory in India was expanding during the second half of the eighteenth century at the hand of the East India Company, which had held a monopoly over trade with Asia since 1600.

### **India**

India was a key and prestigious part of Britain's Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century and would continue to hold this privileged position throughout the century. Expansion in India continued by means of wars and annexations, and by 1850 almost two-thirds of the Indian subcontinent had been acquired, with the rest mostly bound by treaties to Britain. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain continued to secure India's borders by annexing and acquiring further territory.

From the 1830s, reforming and westernizing impulses came to the fore, with, for example, a number of traditional Indian customs being suppressed. However, the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58—when elements of the Indian army rebelled and the British lost control over a large tract of northern India, taking much desperate fighting to restore their authority—was a big shock and caused the government to reassess its approach in India. As a result the East India Company was abolished and the area the company had administered was placed under formal imperial rule. British governance in India also changed direction, with the government thereafter being hesitant to interfere in religious and social customs, believing that it had been the policy of Anglicization that had caused the rebellion. Instead, it started to support traditional Indian rulers and concentrate on material improvements, particularly railway building. Such improvements, along with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, led to India growing in economic importance to Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century; by the 1880s, India was taking one-fifth of British overseas investment and almost 19 percent of British exports.



## West Indies

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, another lucrative part of the British Empire was its colonies in the West Indies, where coffee, cotton and particularly sugar were grown on large slave plantations. However, this boom proved to be temporary. The abolishment of slavery in 1834 and the ending of preferential tariffs on sugar from the West Indies in 1846 dealt considerable blows to islands' plantations. Costs and competitors (not inhibited from using slave labour) increased, and labour was in shortage (with indentured labourers, particularly from India, having to be recruited). By mid century, the plantations were struggling. Moreover, the transition from slave to free societies created many tensions, and colonial self-rule was eventually replaced by direct rule throughout the West Indian colonies by the mid 1870s.

## The White Settler Colonies

Another major part of Britain's Empire during the nineteenth century was its white settler colonies, including Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand (which had been annexed in 1840). They all had expansionist impulses—often at the expense of their native populations—with all of these colonies expanding in size during the nineteenth century. Their populations also increased; by 1901 11.5 million people lived in Britain's settler colonies—up from 550,000 in 1815—with this growth being achieved both through natural increase and immigration (particularly from Britain).

While many colonies were ruled autocratically by Britain, the colonies of settlement were allowed to rule themselves as far as possible, with appointed

governors sharing some of their authority with locally-elected assemblies. "Responsible government" (essentially, colonial internal self-rule) was first introduced in the Canadian colonies in the 1840s and early 1850s and was eventually extended to the other settler colonies—Australia and New Zealand in the mid 1850s, and the Cape Colony in 1872. In 1867 the colonies of Canada East, Canada West, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia joined together to form the Dominion of Canada, and in 1901 the Australian colonies came together to form the Commonwealth of Australia. By the end of the nineteenth century, these areas had been transformed from restricted or insecure outlying colonies into confident, wealthy, self-governing societies.

## Africa and Asia

During the late nineteenth century, dramatic extensions of British territory were made in Africa and South East Asia. During the 1880s and 1890s, Britain added greatly to its territory in Africa during the so-called European 'scramble for Africa'. Britain's gains included Egypt (although it never became a formal colony), Kenya, Uganda, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, and eventually the Afrikaner republics of southern Africa (the Orange Free State and the Transvaal) as a result of winning the Boer War (1899-1902). Some became Crown colonies, others became protectorates, and others were administered by chartered companies. However, with the exception of the Cape Colony and the Transvaal, these African colonies were relatively insignificant economically. During the late-nineteenth century, Britain also expanded its territory in South East Asia, acquiring the whole of the Malay peninsula, North Borneo, and the rest of Burma.

## Reasons for Expansion

Thus, the British Empire grew greatly in the nineteenth century, especially after 1870. However, this growth was not always planned or intended, and attitudes towards the Empire varied greatly. Indeed, the early and mid nineteenth century was not a period of positive, aggressive belief in the wisdom of expanding Britain's Empire. Nevertheless, the Empire grew, mostly as a by-product of the drive to secure free trade, protect the existing empire, and due to expansionist impulses in the colonies themselves; indeed, very often the British government had little control over events in the colonies, and annexation was always seen as a last resort. There was some discussion during this period over what to do with Britain's Empire. However, while some argued that the colonies were expensive and useless, providing little in return for all the money spent protecting, governing and policing them, many believed that the Empire should be sustained, as it confirmed Britain's status as a world power and was useful strategically, economically and demographically (as an outlet for Britain's expanding population). Moreover, many Britons during this period also believed that it was Britain's duty, as the most advanced nation in the world, to spread civilization through the world—religion, progress and good governance.

However, starting in the 1870s, Britain entered what has been termed the 'Age of Imperialism'. No matter which government was in office, the Empire expanded at a rapid rate during these years, with areas that had previously belonged to the "informal empire" of trade coming under formal rule and new areas being annexed. Aggressive imperial expansion was driven in particular by new foreign rivalries (especially with

Germany, France and Russia); British interests throughout the world were thought to be threatened, and annexations were made to secure these interests. The acquisition of new territory was cheered on by enthusiasts for empire—called Imperialists—who formed a vocal (though not altogether successful) pressure group during this period, arguing for closer Imperial relations and unity (in political, economic and military spheres). Imperialism came to be closely linked with the Conservative party, which became the party of Empire; William Gladstone and his fellow Liberal politicians were often hostile to imperial expansion, although the Empire continued to expand even when they were in power. Few politicians, though, were completely opposed to the Empire itself and most agreed that the government should protect the existing Empire and do what was necessary to secure British interests worldwide.

## Economics and Empire

Was the Empire profitable to Britain? The British Empire was decentralised, non-mercantilist and built on and around free trade. However, trade was never confined to the Empire. Between 1850 and 1870, only around one-third of British exports went to the Empire and only about one-fifth of imports came from the Empire—figures which were never exceeded. While some businessmen and investors profited, especially those involved in colonial agriculture, public utilities and mining, the British public at large saw few profits from the Empire. The possession of an overseas empire thus did not substantially improve (or weaken) Britain's economic position, nor was the Empire paramount in British economic life.

## Imperial Britain

If the British public at large did not profit from the Empire, did its presence affect their lives in any way? During the late nineteenth century in particular, it certainly seems that Britain was saturated by imperialism. The Empire was a prevalent theme in popular fiction and children's magazines, and attempts were made to inculcate imperial pride through the new state schools. There were also a number of popular Imperial Exhibitions during this period and an expansion of music-hall entertainment, where patriotic songs celebrating the Empire were a staple element. The monarchy even became identified with the Empire, with Queen Victoria being given the title Empress of India in 1876. Advertisers during this period often linked their products to the Empire, and imperial news was carried in many newspapers. Britons were captivated by the reporting of the Indian Mutiny and the Boer War, with newspapers spending much money on telegraphy to bring news of these conflicts to the newspaper-buying public. Moreover, during the late nineteenth century, some mass-circulation newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* not only prominently reported colonial news, but were openly imperialistic and jingoistic, with the *Mail* declaring itself to be 'independent and Imperial' and the *Express* proclaiming that its party was 'the British Empire'. There was thus a great deal of imperial propaganda circulating around Britain during these years, some being produced deliberately by imperialists to rouse public enthusiasm for Empire. However, it is unclear how it was all received—especially by working people—and how much they accepted the ideas behind imperialism.

Nevertheless, there were many other more tangible ways in which Britons were connected to their Empire. Some towns and regions, like Glasgow, Dundee and Lancashire, were closely connected to the Empire, through their respective shipbuilding, jute and cotton industries. For the professional middle classes, the Empire provided jobs and aided professional development; service in the colonies, especially in India, came to be quite prestigious and well-paid. The Empire also provided a sphere for middle-class volunteerism; many missionaries went to the Empire, where they often provided a humanitarian aspect to British imperialism. Finally, as has already been mentioned, many Britons emigrated to the Empire during this period.

## Conclusion

During the nineteenth century, the British Empire expanded greatly, becoming the Empire on which 'the sun never sets'. However, its impact on British politics, economics and culture was perhaps not as monolithic and momentous as one might expect. The diversity of its impact and influence is reflected in the newspaper press, with different papers representing and appealing to different groups in British society; while *The Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* were among the Empire's greatest supporters, many others were far less sanguine. The British Empire during the nineteenth century was thus extremely diverse and pluralistic, and its effects on Britain were equally as complex.

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