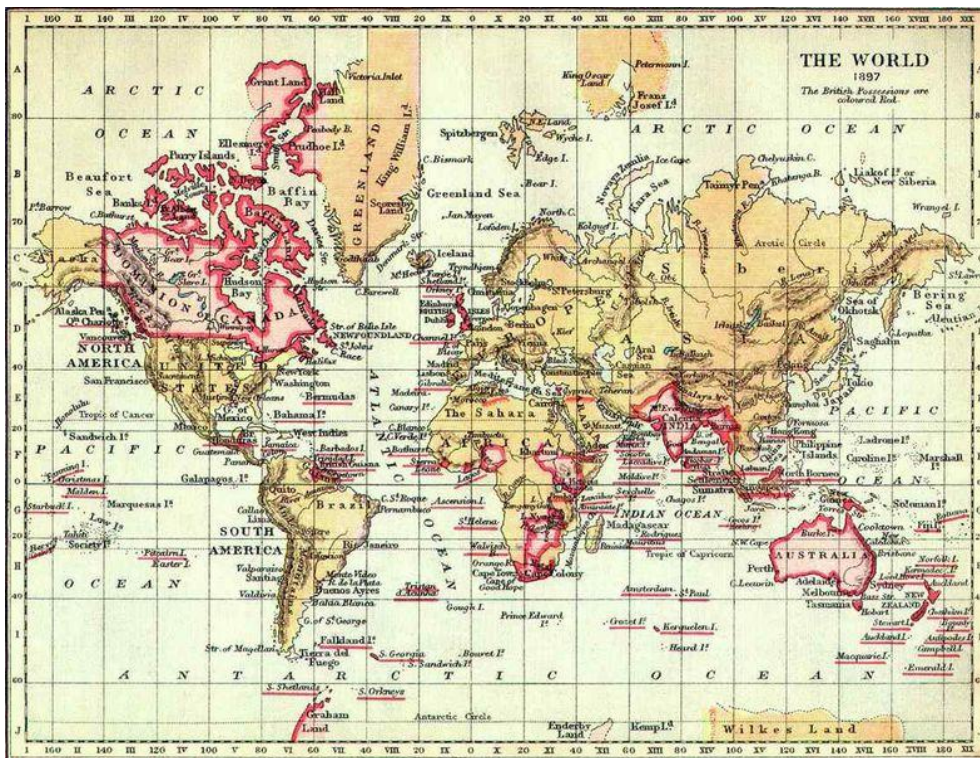


# The British Empire and the Establishment of the Modern World



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Empire

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April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006

The British Empire, beginning in the late sixteenth century with the colonization of the Ulster Plantation in Ireland, would by the early twentieth century become the largest global realm this world has ever known. It ruled over a quarter of the world's population and land. Its scope included five continents, all four oceans, and over five hundred million people. A sea-based empire, its strong naval forces of roughly 240 ships and 40,000 sailors carried out its success (Ferguson, 138). Depending upon the time and place, the British Empire could be characterized in many different ways.

After the experiment of the Ulster Plantation showed promise, Britain felt the next land to attempt to colonize would be the Americas. After two unsuccessful colonies were forfeited in Roanoke in the 1580s, it looked as if the British would have to try somewhere else to colonize. It would be John Smith and his Jamestown colony that would revive the hopes of American colonization. His approach to work with the natives and the discovery of a profitable tobacco crop encouraged what would eventually become Britain's largest trade partner. William Penn and his cheap and religious tolerant territory would also attract many colonists. Most of the 20 million British people who emigrated from their homeland from 1600-1950 went to the United States (Ferguson, 45). In fact, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were the only nations that would sustain a large English population. While the others would become commonwealths or dominions of Britain, the United States would famously fight to earn its independence from an "irresponsible government" (Ferguson, 90).

While the spread of Christianity brought many to India and Africa, it was primarily commerce that led the way. The British East India Company began around 1600 with the motive to strengthen trade and investment in that area. As it grew, it began to gain territories in India; Britain was thus achieving at this time, indirect imperialism. Soon, it would engage militarily

against those who tried to limit its expansion. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the British East India Company had taken over all of India. After the Indian Mutiny in the 1850s, Britain Raj took direct imperial control over the Asian nation (Ferguson, 137). Interestingly, the British were able to rule a country of over 250 million people with only 75,000 British soldiers in India itself. This was achieved because of the new technological communication and transportation systems that were being established. The telegraph, the steamship, and the railroad were essential to the British Empire's domination. Also, a native Indian army was created that provided 148,000 more troops (Ferguson, 204). From this strategic headquarters, the British were able to exercise indirect imperialism on bordering territories and nations.

International investment of the British Empire was another form of indirect imperialism used effectively. As the world's banker, over 60% of foreign trade went to "extra-European partners, like Latin America" (Ferguson, 203). This gave them immense economic clout, which could then be used to satisfy their imperial interests.

Around 1875, the "scramble for Africa," as it is famously called, was a story of military occupation. Noncompliance from the natives resulted in massive slaughters and hundreds of thousands dead. Justification was found in social Darwinism and blatant racism. In 1882, the British successfully overran Egypt; in 1899, she controlled South Africa; by 1914, the British Empire ruled over thirty percent of Africa's population. These were "non-settler colonies", "colonies of exploitation," in which the primary interest was cheap labor and raw materials to strengthen the British industrial machine (Howe, 76).

The American Empire and the British Empire do have some striking similarities as well as differences. They were both, at their given time the greatest economic and military force. However, the United States' economy and its Navy both surpass anything the British had at their

time of rule. Britain's GDP relative to the rest of the world was 8%, compared to the U.S. GDP of over 22% today (Ferguson 314). At one point the British Empire's goal was only to financially influence the world, as is the U.S. role today through many MNC's and international banking systems. The United States, like Britain was, is now the primary missionary nation. While many British left to settle in other areas, the U.S. continues to attract people to its homeland. As we continue to attempt to spread democracy, our role as a global power will expand.

My views about the British Empire are, like the author's, mixed. Some of the worst atrocities were committed during the occupation of African tribal territories. The African slave trade may be the worst mark of the whole experience, in which millions of free Africans were bought and sold like cattle. The creation of arbitrary borders that separates culturally similar people and combines ethnically different groups continues to be an issue brings bloodshed. The mere tyrannical exploitation of millions of people to better the lives of so few seems inhumane. The treatment of Africans, Native Americans, Indians, and Aborigines of Australia as less than people is a little more than appalling.

However, as the author clearly points out in this book, "the fact remains that no organization in history has done more to promote the free movement of goods, capital, and labor as well as impose Western norms of law, order, and governance than the British Empire" (Ferguson, xxi). I especially like the point the author makes about bringing the "idea of liberty" to these places. Although clearly not always expressed, the British Empire could have been far more tyrannical and cruel. Laws and ordinances decided for the most part how these colonies would be ruled. If dictatorships like the regimes in Germany and Japan in the 1940s were to have occupied these places or empires like Russia and China were to control these areas, liberal

capitalism would not be as globally accepted as today and the natives would have clearly been subjected to far worse (Ferguson, 303). The university, team sports, modern banking, and the English language were also carried throughout the empire. All in all, the British Empire was pivotal in the creation of the modern world.

## Works Cited

Ferguson, Niall. Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power. London: Penguin Books, 2002

Howe, Stephen. Empire: A Very Short Introduction. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002