

## Lesson I: British Imperialism A Historical Background

### Course Description:

This course covers the significance of 'empire' and 'imperialism' in the course of British history and civilization. It follows a chronological line to see, in an eye-catching analysis, the rise, the development, and the decline of the British Empire. The course invites students to delve into Britain's past in order to understand her present. In this regard, the course equips students with necessary theoretical frameworks to sustain an adequate understanding of British imperialism. In other words, while discussing Britain's imperial or mercantilist motives, the course puts students face to face with Cain and Hopkins' theory of 'gentlemanly capitalism' that provides the basis behind British imperialism.

### Course Goals and Objectives:

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Conceptualize crucial terms such as British Empire and imperialism.
- Identify the phases of the British Empire, following chronological line to understand the emergence, the development, and the decline of the British Empire.
- Discuss the declared intentions of the British imperialism and uncover the Imperial ulterior Motives.
- Enable students to back up their analysis with elaborate theories: The theory of 'gentlemanly capitalism'
- Respond critically to the causes that led to the dismantlement of the British Empire

## The lesson's outline

- **Introduction**
- **What is the British Empire? What is imperialism?**
- **Roots and Beginnings of the British Empire: 'Becoming the centre of the world'**
- **Imperial or Mercantilist Motives: The theory of 'gentlemanly capitalism'**
- **Why did the Sun eventually set on the British Empire?**
- **Conclusion**

*"His Majesty's dominions, on which the sun never sets."* – John Wilson

*"The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much."* – Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

## Introduction

The British Empire has largely been a sensational story and an important piece of world history. Spanning over four centuries, historians enthusiastically continue to research and uncover new things about the British Empire. However today more than ever, people are increasingly growing interested in anatomizing, questioning, and understanding the story of the British Empire.

From early discoveries, through bitterly fought wars with other competing powers, to popular uprisings, the British Empire experienced dramatic changes and upheavals during the course of history. Britain was able to found a complex network of imperial ties and the outcome is that the shape of the nation, its politics, and its economy heavily depended on international and imperial ties. Nevertheless, once these ties were undone, they gave birth to post-colonial

world of today. Here, I draw the attention to the fact that students, researchers, and scholars of British civilization are with the imposing task and the urgency to give importance to imperial and global history as study of the age of empires retains high relevance to an aware understanding of the post-colonial world burning issues.

## **What is the British Empire? What is imperialism?**

### **- What is the British Empire?**

According to the BBC website, “an *empire* is a group of countries ruled over by a single monarch or ruling power. An empire doesn't need an 'emperor'. The British Empire comprised of Britain, the 'mother country', and the colonies, countries ruled to some degree by and from Britain”<sup>1</sup>.

In the introduction to his seminal book entitled *British Imperialism*, Robert Johnson argues, “the British Empire seems, at first sight, to merit a straightforward definition. United by the British Crown, and governed from London, the vast array of territories and seas that fell under British military and economic control was the Empire on which ‘the sun never set’”. (01)

### **- What is imperialism?**

Harrison M. Wright in his essay “Imperialism”: The Word and Its Meaning” laments that there is no generally accepted definition of the terms “imperialism” among historians the thing which created what he calls “*semantic chaos*” (660). Nevertheless, despite its ambiguity according to *Britannica encyclopedia* “Imperialism is the state policy, practice, or advocacy of extending

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zf7fr82/revision/1>

power and dominion, especially by direct territorial acquisition or by gaining political and economic control of other territories and peoples”<sup>2</sup>.

## **Roots and Beginnings of the British Empire: ‘Becoming the centre of the world’**

In the 16th century, Britain had inaugurated a typically British age of discovery wherein it began to establish overseas colonies. In spreading the country’s rule and power beyond its borders through a process called ‘imperialism’, Britain had built a large empire with colonies in America and the West Indies. The geographically growing size of Britain brought colossal changes to societies, industries, cultures and the lives of peoples all around the world.

The size of the British Empire – be it the amount of land or number of people under British rule – changed in size over the years. At its height in 1922, it was the largest empire the world had ever seen, covering around a quarter of globe’s land surface and ruling over 458 million people.

The outset of the empire can be traced back to the establishment of the thirteen colonies in the New World. Creating colonies was no easy task for the English explorers. In 1585, the famous explorer **Sir Walter Raleigh** tried and failed to build an English settlement at a place called **Roanoke** in Virginia. It was not until 1607 that Captain John Smith founded the first permanent English colony at Jamestown in Virginia. Important to note, historians talk of two crucial phases of the British Empire.

### **- The ‘First British Empire’**

The formative years of the British Empire’ proved not to be very easy, as the English were eager to claim more and more territories. This sometimes meant aggressive fight with

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/imperialism>

other European nations so as to take over their colonies. Britain, wanted more land overseas where it could build new colonies. These colonies would provide England with valuable resources like precious metals, sugar and tobacco, which they could also sell to other countries.

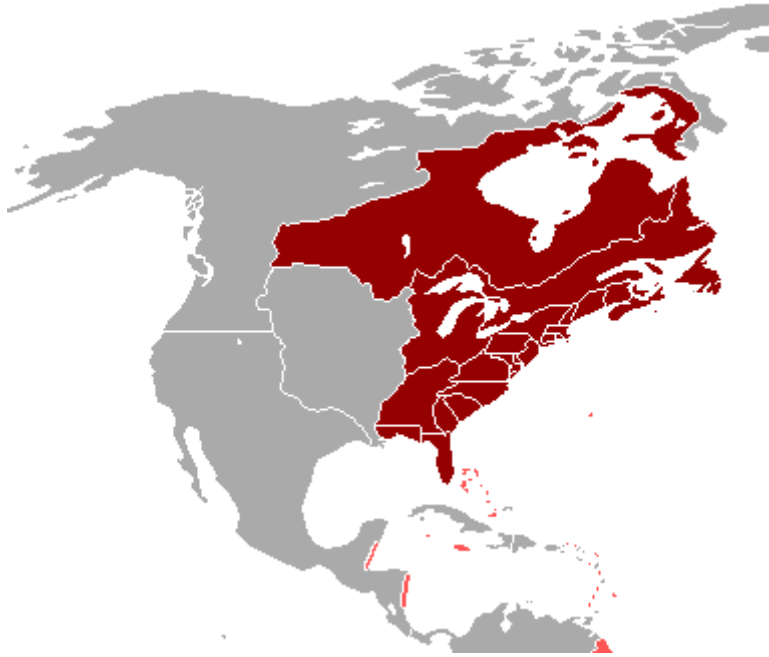
Over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, England acquired major colonies in North America and further south in the West Indies (Caribbean Islands) after a ferocious fight with Spain and France. What encouraged the establishment of permanent settlements was the mild climate suitable for growing crops like sugar and tobacco, so they set up large-scale plantations. In confirming what has already been claimed, Felix Von Oppenheimer in his book *British Imperialism* (2010) confirms: “Great Britain”, which Imperialists regard as their ideal, had already commenced at the opening of the seventeenth Century, three hundred years ago” (11).

In another dimension, what is emphasized here is that England established companies to translate the theoretical imperialistic plan into practice. In India for instance, the Trading settlements were founded by a company called **the East India Company**. This company acquired such an enormous power that it allowed England to control the trade of luxury goods like spices, cotton, silk, and tea from India and China. Its potent influence even touched a sensitive area of politics.

The years 1775-1783 were not happy for the British imperial project. A far-reaching event changed radically the British history, as the nation lost a vast portion of its empire in the North America as soon as the thirteen colonies had opted for a War of Independence.<sup>3</sup> The independence of the thirteen colonies to become United States of America marked the end of what historians usually call the ‘First British Empire’.

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<sup>3</sup> Feeling more ‘American’ rather than ‘British’, the settlers resentfully disapproved of being taxed by the government of their mother country without having a full representation. The 13 colonies in North America had united their efforts and fought to be free themselves from British rule.



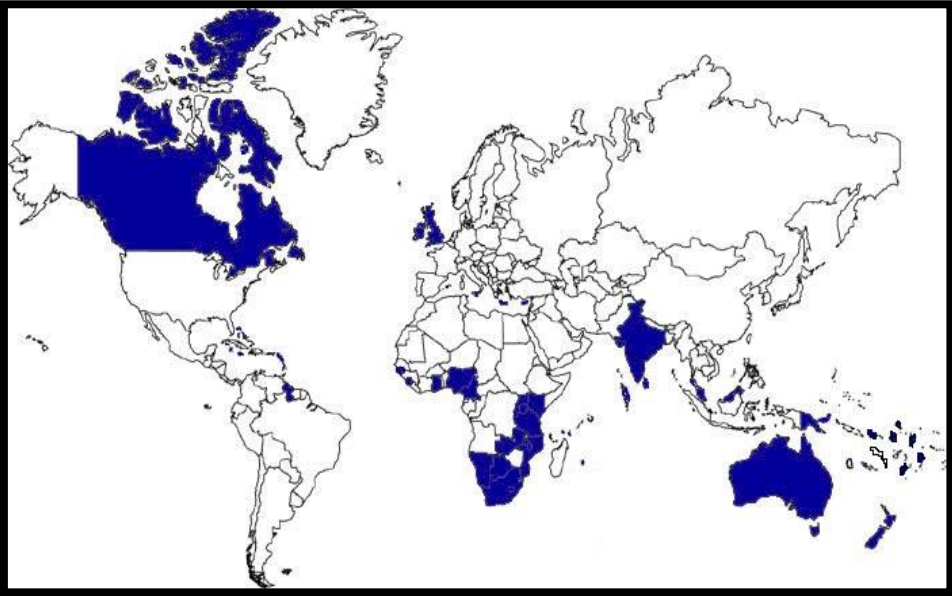
The First British Empire map

### - **The ‘Second British Empire’**

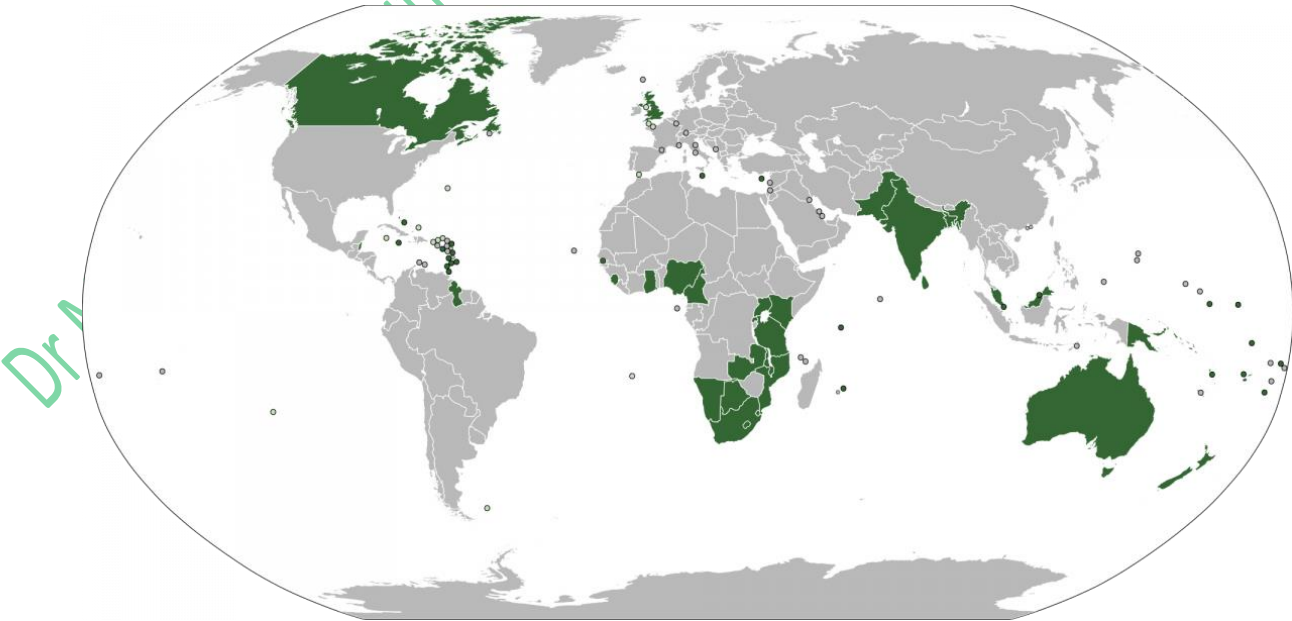
Despite the fact that Britain had lost a huge part of North American territories, it claimed new lands in the late 18th Century and early 19th Century, forming the ‘Second British Empire’. The industrial revolution was one strongest impetus that pushed Britain to find substitute markets for its booming economy. Colonies were therefore established in parts of Australia, and later Trinidad and Ceylon or what is known today as Sri Lanka, Singapore and Hong Kong as well as other parts of Asia.

However following “The Berlin Conference” (1884-1885) that formalized the scramble for Africa, Britain was quickly aware about concretizing the conference outputs. Effectively, thirteen European nations such as Great Britain, France, Portugal, Netherlands, and Germany, in addition to the United States, began looking to Africa for natural resources for their growing economies. Correspondingly, they met in Berlin to agree to the rules dividing Africa. The outcome of the conference was the General Act of the Berlin Conference. In the period between 1881 and 1902, Britain successfully competed with other European empire-builders. The

consequence is that by the early 1900s, huge parts of Africa – including Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and large areas of southern Africa – all came under British rule. The British Empire got a size and became far more powerful than ever.



The Second British Empire Map



The Second British Empire Map

## Imperial or Mercantilist motives and “The theory of `gentlemanly capitalism”

The overtly declared intentions of colonialism or imperialism are to civilize and Christianize non-white and non-Christian indigenous peoples. In the imperialists' eyes, they have a heavenly mandate to **improve and develop heathen nations** and **bring order to non-white lands**, which – owing to racist attitudes – are thought of as ‘savages and ‘backward’.

However, among the ulterior motives behind conquering new lands one may choose to argue is that the colonies offered money-making opportunities for wealthy Englishmen and provided England's poor and unemployed with new places to live and new jobs. In similar context, David Cody argues that until the early nineteenth century, the primary purpose of **Imperialist policies was to facilitate the acquisition of as much foreign territory as possible**, both as a source of raw materials and in order to provide real or potential markets for British manufactures.

On the other hand, historians accentuate the importance of what came to be known as the theory of `gentlemanly capitalism'. Propounded by P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, is a theory of New Imperialism that **revolves around the complex of economic, social and political power centring on the City of London** - which they developed to explain Britain's imperial expansion. The interpretation brings to the fore economic activities that preceded the industrial revolution, interacted with it, and retained their vitality after the onset of industrial decline. The theory 'gentlemanly capitalism' is initiated to focus attention on the most important of these activities, based on land, finance, and commercial services, and also to underline their cultural superiority and political dominance. The theory posits that **British imperialism was driven by the business interests of the City of London and landed interests**. It encourages a shift of



emphasis, away from seeing provincial manufacturers and geopolitical strategy as important influences, and towards seeing the expansion of empire as emanating from London and the financial sector.

### **Why did the Sun eventually set on the British Empire?**

Over the course of the 20th century, Britain's empire broke down in stages. After the First World War (1914-1918) there was a feeling of 'nationalism' sweeping the globe, whereby countries should have the right to be independent and rule themselves. In 1926, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa became independent. These territories were no longer under British control and this explains the way the British Empire started to shrink. The reason why these lands were given independence is that these countries **had large white populations of European decent**, supervised by formal governments. Hence, they were regarded to be more experienced and 'abler' to run successfully their own affairs. In doing so, the costs of administering them would be cut and in this sense, they would be more beneficial to the empire as a whole. However, the Racist views held by the British at the time meant that other British colonies – with large populations of non-white people – were not to granted independence, even when they solicited for it.

Over the next decades, however, the remaining colonies continued to push for independence. After the Second World War, Britain no longer had the wealth or strength to manage an empire overseas. Although people of color were mainly given low-rank positions, thousands of colonial subjects had fought for the British during WWII with the hope they would be given independence. A large-scale wave of decolonization began with India and Pakistan, whose independence was accomplished **in 1947**. In what followed an increasing struggle of African and Asian colonies for independence from the 1950s to 1980s accelerated. By 1958 Britain agreed that Nigeria would be become an independent state. Uganda gained

independence from the UK in 1962; Kenya attained independence in 1963; Zambia 1964; Botswana 1966; Zimbabwe in 1980...etc

## References and resources

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