

The British Empire in the Nineteenth Century

Máire ní Fhlathúin

University of Nottingham

The Bible Society Cleanings.
Various source media, 19th Century UK Periodicals
DECEMBER, 1896.



IN CENTRAL AMERICA.
Native Indians at Home.



THE TOURISTS—T. W. HARKER AND H. GREEN.

A CYCLING TOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA.

BY THOMAS WOODVILLE HARKER.

ii. HE vrow is indeed the helpmate of her husband in every way, would be useless. I do believe the American poet at some time or other must have had visions in his dreams of this portion of the globe, for has he not written:—

Baptisms at San Salvador. [FEBRUARY, 1899.]



JANUARY 1, 1890.] THE MISSIONARY HERALD.
CALABAR COLLEGE, KINGSTON, JAMAICA.
THE following graphic letter from S. B. Burton, Esq. F.R.G.S., of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, will be read with great interest:—
"Newcastle-on-Tyne, December, 1894.
"DEAR MR. BAYNES,—The request "On the twelfth day out we passed
Royal Mail s.s. *Eden* on July 18th last.

The history of British imperialism during the nineteenth century describes a process of expansion and consolidation, its success all the more remarkable for its unpromising beginnings. The idea of empire had lost much of its attraction at the latter end of the eighteenth century, following revolution and war in North America and the loss of the thirteen American colonies. Maintaining an empire was no longer seen as a prerequisite for developing and protecting Britain's international trade, and the influential economist Adam Smith argued in 1776 that 'Great Britain derives nothing but loss from the dominion which she assumes over her colonies'. [1] Even as he wrote, however, new forms of colonial domination were emerging at different locations around the world. From across the British Isles, large numbers of settlers travelled to the main "white colonies" (Canada, Australia and New Zealand), establishing institutions and forms of government that mirrored those of Britain. In India and Africa, a relatively small cohort of colonial administrators and armed forces imposed British rule in territories where British influence had previously been weak or non-existent.

Canada

The territory of British North America, the colonies remaining under British control after the establishment of the United States of America, continued to attract large numbers of settlers throughout the nineteenth century. While most of the country was settled by British immigrants, the mainly francophone population of Quebec constituted a substantial religious and linguistic minority, retaining its own ethnic identity. Quebec was, however, brought together with Upper Canada by an Act of Union in 1840, and the territory

further expanded with the creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867. Indigenous residents were displaced in the process of settlement, and eventually formed a small minority of the population.

Australia and New Zealand

James Cook's three voyages of exploration between 1768 and 1779 laid the foundations for the colonization of Australia and New Zealand, and stimulated British trade and missionary activity across the Pacific islands. This was, from the beginning, a new kind of colonization. While the North American settlements had been founded on land purchased from its Amerindian occupants, Cook claimed a swathe of territory along the east coast of present-day Australia for Britain on the grounds that it was terra nullius, empty or uncultivated land. This claim implicitly disregarded the indigenous inhabitants and their relationship to the land, albeit a relationship unfamiliar to Cook and his contemporaries. The British government used its new territory as a destination for convicts transported overseas. The "First Fleet" of convicts and their guards sailed into Botany Bay in 1788, beginning an eighty-year period during which criminals, rebels and some free settlers, mainly from England and Ireland, were landed in New South Wales. Most were never to return; convicts became landholders once their time was served.

The islands of what became New Zealand were initially destination for freed convicts and others migrating from Australia. They were annexed in 1840, and opened to direct settlement from Britain thereafter, a move which led to conflict with the Maori inhabitants. Like

their counterparts in Australia, these were displaced from much of the land as settler populations expanded. New Zealand, Australia and Canada each attained a high degree of political autonomy over the course of the nineteenth century, as locally-elected bodies assumed responsibility for their own internal government.

India

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the East India Company began a process of transformation from a trading company into a semi-autonomous state. During the nineteenth century, the area under British direct or indirect control expanded from the original colonial settlements in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, as the Company engaged in military action and formed strategic, one-sided alliances with Indian rulers. It eventually covered the sub-continent, extending eastwards to Burma and south to include Ceylon. To the north, Afghanistan was a perennial location of conflict, the scene of British losses in the Afghan wars of the 1840s and 1870s, but despite these reverses, British power in the area remained sufficient to deflect the threat of Russian advances towards the north-west frontier of India.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the East India Company's long-standing practice of managing states through "protective" agreements had been replaced by a drive to impose direct rule. Under the "doctrine of lapse", the British administration took over control of kingdoms where a ruler had died without a recognised male heir; other territories, including the rich and historically powerful kingdom of Oudh, were annexed on the grounds that they had been mis-governed. The

disaffection thus produced among the elite classes contributed to the 1857-8 insurrection against British rule traditionally, if controversially, known as the "Indian Mutiny". Although the rebels held their ground for a time, and inflicted substantial losses on their opponents, the rising failed in its objective of dislodging the British. The Company's government was replaced by direct rule from Britain, and Queen Victoria assumed the title of Empress of India in 1876.

Unlike the white settler colonies of North America and Australasia, the Indian sub-continent never became a destination for large numbers of British emigrants. Most of those who made the journey travelled as employees of the East India Company, and returned once their employment was at an end. Nevertheless, the presence of British people, and the imposition of British rule, had substantial effects on the indigenous societies of India. Bengal suffered economic decline and famine in its first years under Company government. Across India, changes in the relationships between landholders, farmers and the state tended to disadvantage the old aristocratic classes, as well as leading indirectly to the growth of a strong middle class, especially in Bengal.

Africa

British settlements in Africa were initially confined to four relatively small areas: Gambia, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone (founded in 1787 as a refuge for freed slaves) and the Cape Colony of southern Africa. This last territory, a Dutch settlement since the seventeenth century, had been taken over by the British in 1795. It remained a British white settler colony during the

nineteenth century, and was incorporated into the Union of South Africa following the Second Boer War (see below) at the start of the twentieth century.

Other European countries maintained similarly limited holdings on the African continent. Outwith these areas, however, the social and economic fabric of indigenous societies had for a long time been affected by interactions with Europe, not least through the slave trade. As explorers and missionaries – some, like David Livingstone, celebrities whose exploits were widely followed in their home countries – moved inwards from the coastal settlements in the mid-nineteenth century, Africa became the focus of European interests, both commercial and humanitarian. From the 1880s onwards, amid a global economic recession, British imperialism acquired a new impetus: Japan, Russia, the USA, and other European countries such as Belgium and Germany were beginning to develop the means to compete as imperial powers, building modern navies and targeting the “unclaimed” areas of Africa.

The “scramble for Africa” in the 1880s and 1890s saw the continent partitioned into European colonies: Egypt, the ‘Central African Federation’ (Northern and Southern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland), Nigeria and British East Africa were all among the territories that became part of the British empire. In the new British possessions, the practice of “indirect rule”, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, emphasised the role of indigenous rulers and traditional institutions, but these were incorporated within a larger colonial administration under British control. African institutions and practices, though they retained their

outward form, acquired new meanings and functions within the apparatus of imperial government.

Imperial Britain

British influence extended beyond the boundaries of the formally-held territories of the Empire. In Asia, the Treaty of Nanking provided for British commercial ventures to be granted access to China in the wake of the First Opium War (1839-42); it also gave Britain possession of Hong Kong. Though China was never colonized or directly subject to British rule, it remained part of the “informal empire” of British influence until the rise of Japan altered the balance of power in the region at the end of the nineteenth century. Britain also had political and economic interests in Latin America and in parts of the Ottoman Empire, often intervening in these regions on different occasions throughout the century. In the West Indies, the movement towards local autonomy apparent in other settler colonies was reversed, as British territories became Crown Colonies in response to the social and political unrest that followed emancipation.

As the British sphere of influence expanded, the idea of an imperial mission became a potent force in domestic British culture. The ‘Great Exhibition of Works of Industry of all Nations’ (1851), intended to showcase Britain’s industrial strength, brought the empire to London and reinforced its British audience’s perception of their own national identity as an imperial power. In the following decades, works such as Charles Dilke’s *Greater Britain* (1869) and J.R. Seeley’s *The Expansion of England* (1883) identified empire with Britishness, or more specifically with Englishness, and

argued for the value to Britain of its overseas possessions as well as the special fitness of the English to rule over other people. John Ruskin spoke of the destiny of England in his inaugural lecture at Oxford University in 1870. He declared that England 'must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men; – seizing every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on, and there teaching these her colonists that their chief virtue is to be fidelity to their country, and that their first aim is to be to advance the power of England by land and sea'. [2] Some of those men and women who travelled overseas – from Scotland, Wales and Ireland as well as England – may have done so in pursuit of this ideal; others were motivated by the prospect of a better life, and assisted (or in some cases compelled) by local authorities, landlords and charitable associations who saw emigration as relieving Britain of unproductive members of its own communities.

A similar mix of idealism and pragmatism characterises the work of the various Christian denominations whose adherents made a large contribution, both intellectually and materially, to the project of Empire during the nineteenth century. The anti-slavery movement, active since the 1780s, had a strong Christian element, and succeeded in influencing public and political opinion in favour of the abolitionist cause. The slave trade was abolished within the British Empire in 1807, and slave-owning made illegal in 1833, although indentured labourers from India were later brought to the West Indies to replace freed slaves. Throughout the century, Christian missionary societies of various denominations, both Protestant and Catholic, sent men and women all over the world. These

missionaries avoided involvement with trade or colonial administration, and their activities were sometimes discouraged by local authorities, as when the East India Company forbade missionary activity within its territories until 1813. [3] In Africa they converted many to Christianity, but they met with little success on the Indian sub-continent, despite maintaining an active and well-funded presence there. Whether they succeeded or failed in their primary aim of making converts, missionaries across the Empire disseminated Western education and the English language, as well as encouraging the adoption of British-style clothing and the use of British manufactured goods. [4] Their activities played an important part in shaping colonized people's cultural and material experience of the Empire.

The end of the nineteenth century saw Britain's involvement in the second Boer War (1899-1902), the culmination of a long period of conflict in southern Africa. Volunteers from across the Empire fought on the British side, and the war ended with the annexation of two Boer republics. It was a victory achieved at a high financial cost, and the British "scorched earth" tactics and use of concentration camps caused great loss of life among the Boer population, both military and civilian. Initial enthusiasm for the war among the British public and the wider Empire quickly gave way to disaffection. There was no immediate threat to the Empire, which was to undergo yet further expansion in the decades following, but in a conflict that has been described as 'the first of the twentieth century's anti-colonial guerrilla wars' [5], we can see early indications of the political, military and cultural forces that would eventually bring about its demise.