

# Introduction

The expansion of Europe was one of the most significant phenomena to shape the modern world. Munshi Abdullah, witnessing the transformation wrought by colonization in 1840s Singapore, wrote: 'I am astonished to see how markedly our world is changing. A new world is being created, the old world destroyed. The very jungle becomes a settled district while elsewhere a settlement reverts to jungle.' Pioneered in the modern age by the Iberian powers of Portugal and Spain, vociferously pursued by the Dutch, French, and Russians, taken up late by the Americans, Belgians, Germans, Italians, and Japanese, global colonization became the special preserve of the British.

At its height, the British Empire comprised over 13,000,000 square miles—nearly one-quarter of the earth's land surface—and its merchant marine and navy were supreme at sea. Following the acquisition of new colonies in Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific in the wake of the First World War, Britain was responsible for ruling 500 million people, over a fifth of the earth's population. Measured on indicators of power such as political, economic, and strategic reach, the British Empire was the world's sole superpower. It retained this position until the Second World War, a conflict that accelerated trends that were already making the possession of colonies increasingly anachronistic and diminishing

Britain's (and Europe's) standing in the international system. These economic, political, and cultural trends, and the dramatic changes caused by prolonged global conflict and a rising tide of nationalism, led to the demise of the British Empire during a decolonization spree that witnessed the birth of scores of new nation-states in the four decades following 1945. The aberration that had been Europe's 'moment' of global pre-eminence, in which Britain had been to the fore, had passed.

Long after its demise, the British Empire remains a controversial topic. In 2009 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei identified 'evil' Britain as the foremost enemy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, plumbing a rich vein of anti-British sentiment rooted in imperial interventions dating back to the nineteenth century. In 2005, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa lambasted British imperialists such as Winston Churchill who had travelled to Africa and Asia 'doing terrible things wherever they went'. In 2007 an American author published a book entitled *The Evil Empire: 101 Ways in Which England Ruined the World*, whilst five years later *All the Countries We've Ever Invaded* claimed that the British had put in a hostile appearance in 90 per cent of the world's countries at one time or another.

In Britain, anything to do with the Empire raises temperatures as well as headlines (though perhaps giving a measure of the Empire's diminishing significance and the capacity of post-colonial societies to 'move on', this is less often the case in former colonies). In 2011 a statue of the explorer Henry Morton Stanley was erected in his home town in Wales, to great controversy. Was Stanley to be celebrated still as a hero of Victorian exploration, or pilloried for his excesses and for his role in opening Africa to pernicious European influences? In 2009 Cambridge University was accused of advocating slavery and racism by hosting an 'Empire Ball' in honour of 'the Victorian Commonwealth and all its decadences'. Whilst revellers were exhorted to 'party like it's 1899', protestors pointed to slavery, concentration camps, and a legacy of racial division.

Apologies for, or assertions about its beneficence, define coverage of the British Empire and its legacies in the former 'mother country' and elsewhere. 'Did Britain Wreck the World?' asked a *Newsweek* headline in 2011, whilst a *Financial Times* article appeared under the title 'The Guilt and the Glory'. Michael Palin, President of the Royal Geographical Society, claimed that the British Empire was not as 'wicked' as it was often portrayed, and urged Britons to stop apologizing for their colonial past. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown made the same plea whilst visiting a former African colony in 2005, claiming that 'great British values' such as freedom, tolerance, and civic duty could be admired as some of the country's most successful exports. Apparently a rite of passage for British leaders, his successor David Cameron told an audience in Pakistan that Britain was to blame for many of the world's problems, sparking a flurry of 'was the Empire good or bad?' coverage in the British media. The release in 2011 of thousands of previously withheld British government files saw academic and media attention focus on alleged British atrocities during colonial insurgencies of the 1950s, augmented by a High Court case between Mau Mau victims and the British government (won by the former in 2012). In turn, this coverage elicited a doughty defence of the imperial record. Of course mistakes were made, wrote the historian Lawrence James in the *Daily Mail*, ploughing a familiar furrow, 'but we must never stop being proud of the Empire', which spread progress, stability, and beneficial institutions.

Why the controversy? Because any study of imperialism embraces a range of controversial topics, including unequal power relations, nationalism, race, cultural confrontations, economics, warfare, and ideology. It is controversial because the British Empire affected so many countries in lasting ways and epitomized a period in which, all around the world, non-Europeans were dominated by Europeans. The Empire shaped the modern world, from place names and geographical boundaries to racial demographics, economic networks, and international norms and

laws. It was the major force in the creation of a coherent international order and a potent agent of globalization. The Empire is also controversial because something as large defies easy summary, and perspectives on it vary wildly. It is possible for its admirers or detractors to cherry-pick examples to 'prove' that British rule, overall, was either good or bad, its legacies beneficent or diabolical. Some argue that it was an engine of modernization, others that it was a vehicle of exploitation. As the headlong decolonization of the European empires gathered pace in the 1960s, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that 'We in Europe too are being decolonized. The settler which is in every one of us is being savagely rooted out... It was nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectation of sensibility were only alibis for our aggressions.' Coming from an entirely different camp in a different age, in the early twenty-first century the historian Niall Ferguson argued that the British Empire was better than the other empires of the period. Though its record was by no means untarnished, it brought beneficial global trade and the rule of law, and was overwhelmingly a force for stability and good, influences conspicuously lacking in contemporary badland regions where empire had once held sway.

At its most easily grasped level, the British Empire was a collection of overseas territories governed by offices of the British state or its representatives, though the degree of control varied as did the space in which indigenous people could retain a measure of autonomy. Furthermore, British rule always rested not only upon British military, political, and economic power, but upon alliance with indigenous leaders, elites, and the many indigenous people who were employed by the colonial state. From the eighteenth century until the 1950s it was the world's largest political entity, a powerful military and strategic alliance, and an economic bloc. Of the world's 203 nation states, sixty-three were once ruled by Britain. About twenty others were occupied by Britain for briefer periods, including Cuba, Eritrea, Greece, Guadeloupe, Indonesia, Libya, Madagascar, Martinique, the

Philippines, Senegal, Spain, and Vietnam. At least seven more can be counted as having formed part of Britain's 'informal' empire, a term used to denote a country not officially ruled by Britain but so influenced by it that a patron-client relationship pertained and Britain exercised a disproportionate influence upon the country's rulers and its economy. These countries include Argentina, Chile, parts of maritime China, and Iran. Thus around a third of the world's nation-states at one point or another experienced British rule or significant British influence.

The territories that formed the British Empire—a word meaning sovereignty over a group of nations or peoples—ranged from tiny islands to vast segments of the world's major continents, especially Africa, the Americas, Antarctica, Asia, and Australasia. Stretched across each ocean and time zone, the proud claim that 'the sun never set on the British Empire' was actually true (some said that this was because the British could not be trusted in the dark). Until the 1950s the hackneyed sun-never-set phrase was a commonplace of boys' adventure comics and advertisements for products as diverse as Bird's custard powder and Craven tobacco, illustrating the manner in which themes relating to empire and the non-European world, and Britain's exulted place within it, penetrated British culture and contributed to the formation of an inchoate but powerful imperial mind-set and a sense of British superiority and fitness to rule other peoples.

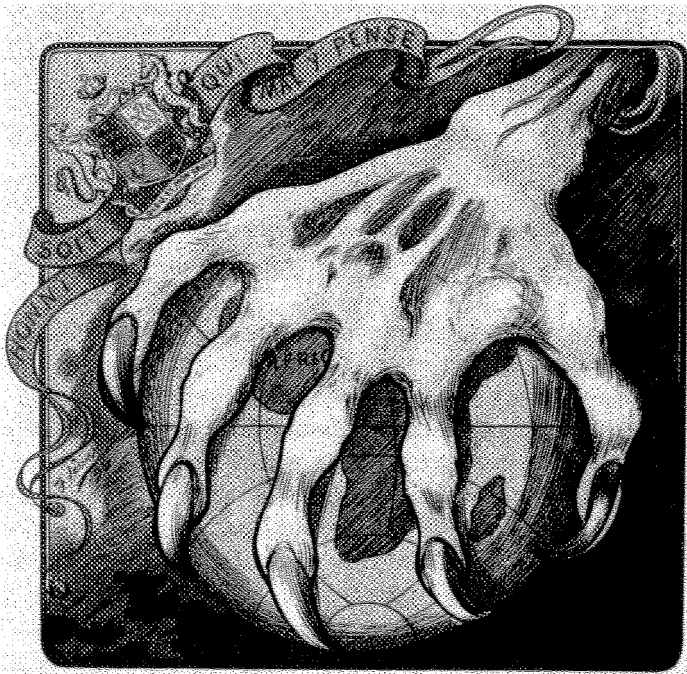
Visual depictions of the Empire's geographical extent were regularly encountered by British people and British subjects overseas, reflecting nationalism, 'race patriotism', and an emergent pride in the creation of a British-shaped world order, a veritable British world. Most commonly, this was through maps of the world centred on the British Isles and showing imperial possessions shaded in red, connected by oceanic trade routes, underwater telegraph cables, and a chain of coaling stations—all, of course, British. It was an iconic representation of global power, encountered in school classrooms and atlases the world over as



2. Empire Marketing Board poster 1927–1933, ‘Highways of Empire’. The EMB was formed to stimulate the British and imperial economy, particularly by persuading people to ‘buy imperial’. The British map of the world, reflecting the Empire’s maritime and commercial character and geographical range, was a powerful national boast. A wide range of ephemera and more durable media and objects transmitted ideas about the privileged place of Britain (and Britons) in relation to other lands and their peoples. British coins, for instance, bore the monarch’s image and the Latin inscription ‘King of all the Britains; Emperor of India’

well as in posters, souvenir brochures, and on day-to-day objects such as stamps, ashtrays, and matchboxes. The Diamond Match Company’s ‘Empire Match’ bore a red-shaded world map and the legend ‘We hold a vaster Empire than has been’. A 1902 advert for Bovril featured each letter of the product’s name made up of the map outlines of dozens of colonies. And so on. Meanwhile, Britain’s domination of the map was used by its rivals to pillory British imperialism. French, German, and Italian cartoonists represented Britain variously as a serpent constricting the globe, as a hideous claw-like hand grasping it, and as an obese John Bull with the red-dominated map spread across his girth. As well as using Britain’s global position to censure it, such responses

reflected a potent national jealousy in an age where other powers were increasingly yearning for their own 'place in the sun'. With their pith-helmets and 'Bombay bloomers' (a name for baggy shorts), British imperialists were an easy target for the caricaturist, 'nasty, brutish, and in shorts', to borrow Brian Aldiss's play on Thomas Hobbes' phrase. But there were other, more benign visions of Britain's empire too – and not just those conjured by the British themselves.



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3. A French caricature of British imperialism, 1899: A claw-like hand encompasses the earth with the wording of the Royal Arms ironically displayed: 'Honi soit qui mal y pense (shame on him who thinks ill of it)'. A powerful image, typical of anti-British illustrations in foreign media

The palpable existence of a British world was felt by Britons and foreigners alike. It was part of the furniture of the international order, with a degree of permanency about it belied by its sudden collapse following the Second World War. In 1938 Enoch Powell flew from Britain to Sydney by Imperial Airways flying-boat to take up the chair of Greek at Sydney University.

Those sixteen days from Poole Harbour to Sydney were a deeply formative experience... It was an exacting routine. Three or four times a day, the flying-boat landed on a sheet of water – lake or river or sea... The traveller of 1938 saw the world close to. It was an incomparable geography lesson – and largely a lesson in Imperial geography. Between Crete and Indonesia there was only one stop out of almost a score – it was, in fact, Bangkok – where the flying-boat touched down anywhere not under British rule or effectively under British authority. Alexandria, the Lake of Galilee, Habbaniya, Basra, Abu Dhabi, Mekran, Karachi, Jaipur, Allahabad, Calcutta, Akyab, Rangoon, Penang, Singapore – one was witnessing the ubiquity of a power on which the sun had not yet set.

The American journalist Cecil Brown remarked upon exactly the same phenomenon on a journey from Egypt to Singapore: 'For five days of flying, from Suez to Singapore, at almost every stop we had touched on water under the protection of the British flag. It was a stunning reflection on Empire.' The memoirs of both men evoke the lost world of the British Empire, and convey a sense of the geography—the imperial geography—that pertained until the 1960s when, with astonishing speed, the Empire dissolved and Britain reverted to an earlier incarnation as a medium-sized European nation, with a global outlook but without a global empire.

As well as describing its physical and political dimensions, the term 'the British Empire' encompassed a collection of projects organized in Britain and its overseas colonies, projects aimed at securing profit for the principals or otherwise forwarding their interests, interests sometimes construed as embracing those of





**4. A British world: From the reign of George VI, a stamp from the British Solomon Islands. In the colonies, postage stamps showed local scenes—Lake Naivasha, Grand Harbour Valletta, the Victoria Falls—or local industries such as orange cultivation and teak forestry, all watched over by a portrait of the British king or queen. Alternatively, colonial stamps would bear images of Britain, such as royal coronations, castles, or the Houses of Parliament**


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indigenous peoples too (perhaps by ‘civilizing’ them, or bringing the apparent boon of Western education and justice, or preventing them from fighting each other, all powerful elements in contemporary justifications of empire). It was also a collection of state projects conducted in competition with other states. The impressive expansion of the British Empire between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries depended on Europe’s technological resources, and on Britain’s success in preventing European challengers from establishing themselves as it came to the forefront of a Western-dominated global economic and political system. The Empire was a product of the rise of global capitalism, an international order underwritten by Britain until replaced by America in the twentieth century. The Empire’s

decline and fall reflected the eclipse of Europe by superpowers and supranational bodies such as the United Nations, and the rise of anti-colonial ideas and the activities of nationalists and freedom fighters no longer prepared to tolerate European rule.

The British Empire shaped the destinies of the hundreds of millions of people who lived within its bounds. In the settler states of America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and Southern Rhodesia, white immigrants came to rule the indigenous inhabitants with only minimal control or regulation from Britain itself. Elsewhere, the British parliament, through Whitehall bureaucracies and overseas civil services, were responsible for governance in Aden, Belize, Bengal, Fiji, Gibraltar, Guyana, Hong Kong, Newfoundland, the Maldives, Papua New Guinea, Swaziland, Trinidad, Uganda, Zanzibar, and scores of other colonies. Though indigenous leaders retained sometimes significant measures of autonomy when it came to ruling 'their' people, they did so as subordinates and on behalf of British overlords. Furthermore, it was British institutions, politicians, and governors who were responsible for the 'big things' that define a government's duties. Such things included monetary policy, foreign affairs, taxation, defence and security, constitutional reform, law and order, land policy, road-building, town planning, and the regulation of trade. British officials were able to tax people, claim their labour, and send them to war, telling measures of the extent of imperial power. Augmenting its grip on the Empire, Britain disbursed power in the international system that established the terms governing each colony's interaction with the global economy, mediating each colony's relationship with the wider world and the forces that shaped it. The colonial state might have been small, but its power over people was remarkable; the impact upon people's lives of a deepening encounter with the global economy which it brokered was even more so.

Imperialism's role in brokering global capitalism and deepening Westernization was fundamentally more significant than the



British Empire per se. The eruption across the world of Europeans, and the profound political, social, and economic changes that trailed in their wake, was an epochal process. The coming of imperial influences often meant a significant loss of control over the forces shaping one's life at the level of the individual and the community. Whilst for some well-placed people the coming of British rule or the establishment of a British-controlled port or trading post could be a liberation and source of opportunity, for others it could be catastrophic. There was never a one-size-fits-all colonial experience; depictions of empire that emphasize thralldom, violence, and ruthless exploitation are as hopelessly flawed as those that focus on the rule of law, stability, free trade, and beneficent progress. The calm and relatively liberal character of the late (i.e. twentieth century) Empire should not obscure earlier conditions; whilst it might have appeared peaceful by the twentieth century, this was often because violence in an earlier period had made it so and had entrenched a spectrum of inequality around the globe.

Though the British Empire, and the phenomenon of large territorial empires, might appear curious now, empires have been the default setting throughout human history, which is one of the reasons why accounts that single out the British Empire for special persecution are unbalanced. Man- and womankind of all racial backgrounds have sought to colonize each other in various ways since the dawn of time. The history of empire is far older than the history of the nation-state, and scores of empires have risen and fallen, their size varying from the regional to the global, and the power of their ruling cores to command their extremities differing widely from empire to empire and from age to age. By contrast, today's international system, comprising over 200 sovereign nation-states, is a novelty.

This historic background notwithstanding, it is still possible to view empires as curious structures. The British Empire was curious because it was ectopic, its core manifestation being people

who were out of place, people erecting edifices of power and authority that allowed them to influence and even dominate the native inhabitants of lands far from their own and to control their resources—to take over places belonging to *other* people. Britain was a Johnnie-come-lately in the business of empire-building as European great powers explored, ransacked, and subjugated the ‘new world’, creating potent connections between European ‘metropolises’ and non-European ‘peripheries’ that were the foundations of the colonial empires that dominated the international system from the seventeenth until the twentieth century. Yet from its modest early position, dwarfed by other states who had blazed imperial trails around the world, over the course of a century Britain’s fortunes waxed, its industry and commerce revolutionized the global economy, and almost everywhere in the world there appeared Britons running up the Union Flag and claiming icepacks and tropical islands for the crown or for some private, ‘chartered’ company. In the process, like a cuckoo in the nest, Britain eclipsed and supplanted its European rivals and became the world’s pre-eminent maritime nation, both in terms of global trade and naval strength, accruing vast colonial holdings in the process and to a significant extent creating the modern world.

# Chapter 1

## The red on the map

### Why Britain?

Before answering the question ‘what was the British Empire?’ this chapter considers some of the reasons why Britain was in a position to acquire an empire in the first place. European powers were able to conquer distant lands due to a number of factors, including Europe’s greater investment in gunpowder technology than other regions. Beyond this, Europe’s success was based on conditions such as the existence of similar sized countries and the corresponding absence of a hegemon, together with incessant warfare and the rapid diffusion of innovations. Within this European milieu, Britain’s particular success stemmed from the state’s early possession of an internal monopoly of violence following the conclusion of civil wars and the defeat of uprisings, the disarmament of nobles, and the integration into a new ‘united kingdom’ of the Irish and the Scottish. It also experienced significant population increase—from 4.9 million in 1688 to 12 million in 1815—and there grew an abnormally large ‘middle class’. Together, these factors meant that there was a rapidly growing domestic market ready to be satisfied by overseas products. There were then the geographical facts of Britain’s location, its long coastlines fostering seafaring skills and traditions and early contact with regions such as the Baltic, the Low Countries, and the Iberian peninsula. Island status also provided a

significant degree of security against invasion. It became increasingly common for the British to reach beyond Europe, in many ways to attempt to outflank it. Seaborne commerce was at the heart of Britain's evolving relations with the world and its eventual growth as an imperial power. The ocean was a connector rather than a barrier, and long before a British Empire became discernible, British people derived wealth and experience from wool, fishing, and other forms of seagoing engagement beyond the British Isles.

Having considered why Britain was well suited to empire-building, one might ask what was distinctive about the British Empire? Its size and globality was a unique feature; after the First World War, around ninety separate territories owed allegiance to the British crown or were in treaty relations with it. Also unique was its creation of overseas satellites—strong settler societies forged by British emigrants that emitted pulses of imperial energy in their surrounding regions. There was then the incorporation of English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh people into the business of empire, creating enormous energy in the process. In its early years the extraordinary vigour generated by a range of Protestant denominations vying with each other in missionary endeavour pushed the Empire's boundaries. The British Empire was more individualistic than the centrally controlled, state religion-dominated Catholic empires, its commercial enterprises and chartered companies freer to act unhindered by church or state. Another definitive feature was the shift from an empire of commerce and the sea—the form of empire that dominated in the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century—to a territorial empire of conquest and settlement. What further marked it out from rival European empires was the impact of Britain's industrialization and the shift from mercantilism to free trade that attended it.

Andrew Thompson further elucidates the attributes that helped generate the momentum for British overseas expansion and the

creation of the 'red on the map' British Empire. These included the evolution of a powerful 'fiscal-military' state, one of the largest and most efficient states in the world and one that was in significant ways replicated in India. Two formidable state capacities were developed during wars with France in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the capacity to wage war on an unprecedented scale and to levy taxes and borrow money cheaply when required. Another aspect was the spread of racial hierarchies and stereotypes based on the idea of the British being a 'governing race'. Crucial too was the evolution of a laissez-faire state willing to allow British people and institutions to go about their business as a vast and diverse array of groups in British society became caught up in the processes of expansion. The laissez-faire state was also able to cede local governance to settler communities overseas, diminishing the prospect of imperial civil wars such as the American War of Independence, and contributing instead to the forging of settler identities that could be simultaneously British, imperial, and local.

There was then the unprecedented drive for overseas markets as Britain became the first industrialized nation, free trade and the search for investment opportunities becoming signature features of British expansion. Britain was the world's strongest industrial power, and under the discipline of the unregulated market became the workshop of the world. Industrialization transformed the nature of British world power and free trade created a series of satellite economies overseas. As John Darwin writes, it facilitated the global projection of military power far beyond the old limits of wind-powered warships, enabling much greater inland penetration than ever before, and greatly cheapened its use once telegraphs, steamships, and rails could shuttle information and manpower across vast distances. Added to this, ever-longer range rifles, machine-guns, shallow-draft gunboats, and artillery pieces increased lethality. It turned the demographic imperialism of settler societies from a slow laborious advance into a blitzkrieg invasion, swamping local resistance and transforming faraway

natural environments into new Britains. It hugely reinforced the cultural prestige of the imperial rulers and increased the volume and intensity of their cultural impact.’

Industrialization was also connected to two other preconditions enabling the growth of the British world system—the migration of tens of millions of people and the export of hundreds of millions of pounds sterling. The City of London established itself as the centre of international trade in foodstuffs and raw materials and became a ‘strongbox’ to invest in. Free trade became ‘a form of imperialism that did not, perhaps dare not, speak its name. Equality of access to markets sounded fine in theory; in practice, however, Britain was the country in by far the best position to take advantage of it’. Underpinning this unique system of overseas settlement and commercial relations was the supremacy at sea of the Royal Navy, vital for the growth and security of the British Empire.

By 1800 [John Darwin writes], British commerce was geared for long distance traffic and the long credit advances required by the cycle of commodity trades; the infrastructure necessary to exercise maritime power in almost every part of the world was in place; and the British consumer was already addicted to a range of exotic new tastes, both cultural and physical. Economic and religious transformation had created a restless, competitive, pluralistic and guilt-ridden society, harbouring rival visions of empire and of Britain’s true place in a world needing redemption. It had the means and the motive to widen the bridgeheads already established in the world beyond Europe, and to send in new ‘landings’ for commerce, conversion, and colonization.

## An empire of many peoples

The British Empire comprised diverse peoples as one would expect given its global range. Afrikaner, Arab, Australian, Chinese, Cypriot, Dayak, Igbo, Inuit, Irish, Maasai, Maltese, Pathan, San,



Shona, Sikh, Somali, Tongan, Yoruba, Zulu; this incredible kaleidoscope of peoples and cultures shone within the British Empire. Its most powerful people were on the whole white Britons and other Europeans. For much of its existence it had within its bounds the world's largest Muslim population. The enormous variety of peoples within the British Empire was reflected in the variety of their responses to British imperialism. They were organized in many different ways, from complex states to stateless societies. They were not mere victims of European colonial intrusion, James Belich emphasizes, but also 'intense, courageous, and well-organized' protagonists who often gave as good as they got in resisting British encroachment, until the superior resources of settlers or soldiers overcame them, or they decided that accommodation was more prudent than continued resistance.

Given that it encompassed so many diverse peoples and polities, the British Empire is usefully conceptualized as an *imperial state*. If the Empire is viewed as one would normally view a nation-state, its shape becomes clearer, its existence, to use P. D. Morgan's often-borrowed phrase, as 'one vast interconnected whole', easier to comprehend. There was its capital and heartland, Britain, and its prosperous home counties, the 'white' dominions. Some of its provinces were loosely ruled, others directly administered. Some of its outlying regions were rebellious, their borders frequently contested. Despite marked local variations, it shared many common elements, including bureaucratic and legal practices, civil services, institutions such as police forces, banks, and the monarchy, capital and grant resources, and communication facilities, and was subject to the imperial parliament in all things, in theory if not always in practice. Its bureaucratic, commercial, legal, and military culture was distinctly British though many local varieties occurred. Shifting hybridity on a British framework was the order of the day. Whilst there was a uniformity at the highest levels of imperial rule, pragmatism dictated the 'shape' of imperial rule on the ground, and this meant that local variety was an important part of the picture.

The British Empire used sometimes to be conceived as a sequence of lines extending from Britain out to the manifold areas of empire, but this approach has been abandoned for recognition of complex webs of connections, centred in Britain but also in its major overseas cities and with many reciprocal influences in the other direction. Though on some readings it might have appeared solid, ordered, and hierarchical, the Empire was ‘an interconnected zone constituted by multiple points of contact and complex circuits of exchange.’ But coherent central power was a defining feature too: whilst the links between distant colonies and bureaucratic and political structures in London might sometimes appear to have been tenuous, they were surprisingly real. London’s interest in tiny outposts or apparently empty quarters could become intense if some event caused its gaze to come to rest there. The British imperial style allowed governors to get on with it and run things as they saw fit, with a light touch from London.

## The Empire’s constituent parts

The Empire was a mass of territories acquired over a period of four centuries, ruled from London with varying degrees of direct and indirect control, and administered on the ground by British appointed civil servants and soldiers, or sometimes employees of British companies. Rule was always exercised with the assistance of indigenous political elites—most pre-colonial, some British created, some powerful, some weak—as well as a host of indigenous employees. Whilst it is often remarked that India was ruled by a small cadre of British civil servants—around about a thousand—what is seldom mentioned in the same breath is that the Government of India employed about a million Indians to assist them in the enterprise. Early imperial rule tended to be quite ad hoc, as it took years for a definable system of administration to develop. The highest imperial authority was the British parliament and the monarch. In the ‘white’ dominions, settler parliaments also became part of the ruling structure, the passage of their legislative acts dependent upon the approval of

the British parliament, their courts subject to the Privy Council in London. Specialist offices of state in Whitehall were responsible for colonial administration, evolving from earlier ad hoc arrangements (for example, the War Office was at one time also responsible for the colonies). They included the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office, the India Office, from the 1920s a Dominions Office, and, briefly, a Burma Office. In turn, specific civil services were established to administer the colonies on the ground, including the Indian Civil Service, the Sudan Political Service, and what in its final years was known as Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service, responsible for the colonial empire and not formally wound up until 1999. The personnel of private companies such as the British South Africa Company in Southern Rhodesia and the East India Company were also heavily involved in ruling the Empire.

A great deal of effort was invested in projecting imperial authority, displaying its governors and viceroys, marking royal occasions and the annual Empire Day celebrations with elaborate ceremonies, all backed up with displays of the Empire's military capacity, both to reassure and to warn and to make the Empire seem more 'real', powerful, and monolithic than ever in fact it was. The quotidian experience of imperial authority for most of the Empire's people was much less visible. Whilst they might occasionally behold a district commissioner touring his 'reserve', performing his legal functions or supervising the damming of a river, authority and bureaucracy was more often encountered in the guise of chiefs, headmen, 'tribal' policemen, and 'native' clerks, or in India through the person and representatives of a maharajah or nawab or of the powerful landowning elites with whom the British formed partnerships in the rural areas.

British rule variously replaced indigenous polities or subdued and ruled through them. There was authority superseded (Mughal India, Southern Rhodesia), incorporated (princely states, Gulf sheikhdoms, Buganda, Northern Nigeria, Malaya, Zanzibar), and

created (northern Ghana, Iraq, Kenya, Palestine, southern Sudan). The trick was to try and persuade people that the British were not alien invaders but legitimate rulers, governing not just by right of conquest but because they were beneficent successors of previous dynasties (until the 1850s the British were careful to keep the last Moghul empire enthroned, shorn of all power but useful for maintaining the fiction that the British were merely ruling on his behalf). The system of indigenous authority and its historicized political traditions was essential to British rule. At its best, British rule was barely visible; traditional leaders, such as Nigerian emirs or Malayan sultans, did the 'ruling', British 'residents' or 'district officers' providing an invisible hand on the tiller in the background, at least when it came to the level of authority concerning chiefs, princes, and the people. But at higher levels, the British were very much in the driving seat. No indigenous leader, no matter how powerful, would be allowed to treat with a foreign power or to possess military power, and the functions of the central treasury and colony-wide levels of government and administration were exclusively British.

The system of working alongside indigenous junior partners, applied consistently in most parts of the Empire, was captured in the term 'indirect rule', first applied to African colonial administration though representative of the Empire's preference for ruling through indigenous patrons and clients. During their decolonization struggles, nationalists needed to undermine these 'traditional' leaders and argue that new, representative 'modern' politicians—like themselves—were the way forward.

## The 'white' dominions

The Empire's main division was a racial one. On one side of the divide was Britain and the self-governing and increasingly autonomous white-ruled settler colonies, known from 1909 as 'dominions'. From the 1926 Balfour Declaration the dominions were deemed constitutionally 'equal' to Britain as members of the

The main classifications within the Empire were:

The empire of settlement (the 'white' dominions)

The Indian empire

The colonial empire

Condominiums (territories ruled jointly with another power)

Treaty-based client states

League of Nations 'mandates' (former German and Ottoman colonies)

The informal empire

British Commonwealth, which became the Commonwealth of Nations in 1946 reflecting the organization's increasingly egalitarian composition as British influence over the dominions declined and decolonization created new nation-states. Almost as soon as they had been founded, the colonies that were to form the larger conglomerations of America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa wanted to be as self-governing as possible, asserting the 'right' of 'free born' Englishmen to rule themselves. Early settlers in places such as Jamaica, St Kitts, and Virginia had done the same, forming their own legislative assemblies that were often at loggerheads with the policies of the British crown and its appointed gubernatorial representatives.

It soon became the aspiration of white settler colonies to achieve 'responsible government' (i.e. internal autonomous parliamentary government based on a bicameral legislature, its decisions subject to the British crown). Not without reservations, London acceded from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, as long as the settler colony in question was considered viable, which in practice meant financially solvent, able to maintain law and order, and not excessively (in London's eyes) cruel to the indigenous population.

The red on the map

London wanted to fulfil settler aspirations to run their own affairs to the greatest extent possible and avoid a repeat of the rebellion that had led the American colonies to leave the Empire and form the United States. Lord Durham's report of 1839 came up with a self-government formula that became a blueprint for dominion autonomy within a British-led imperial system. Though enjoying significant autonomy, these territories remained dependent upon Britain because Britain was responsible for their foreign affairs and defence, purchased the lion's share of their exports, supplied their imports, provided requisite inward investment, and held their sterling balances in London. In all of the colonies of white settlement, the indigenous people were subjugated, usually confined to specially demarcated 'native reserves'. Though never attaining coveted dominion status, Southern Rhodesia was a self-governing colony—which is why its white minority rulers declared unilateral independence from Britain in 1965 when the 'mother country' threatened to force black majority rule upon it - and the white settlers of Kenya unsuccessfully campaigned for this status too.

## India and the colonial empire

The rest of the Empire was entirely different from this white-dominated settler state component. It was entirely different in that it was an empire of non-whites ruled by whites. Though indigenous elites—African chiefs, Hashemite kings, Indian princes, and Gulf sheikhs—were part of the ruling team and could wield immense power in relation to their people's daily lives, they were subordinate to the representatives of the British monarch and their provincial and district officers. This was ultimately the case even where the British presence was a light one. Any of these local rulers could be deposed if they strayed from the 'advice' that they were offered or if they rocked the boat or made sheep's eyes at a rival colonial power. The indigenous rulers were disarmed, allowed only (and if they were very senior indeed) to maintain small 'parade ground' military formations designed for

ceremonial, not combat, duties. They could jostle for honours, such as the Star of India, specially created extensions of the British state's network of patronage; they could compete for the highest number of gun salutes their station warranted when visiting London for coronations. But they could not compete for political power at the highest level. This was a measure of their and their societies' subordination to colonial rule, a blunt but accurate barometer of where power lay in the imperial system.

So these were the two main 'types' of overseas holding in the British Empire—the white settler states that, though tied to Britain by all sorts of visible and invisible ties, were internally self-governing and increasingly autonomous within the imperial framework; and the rest of the Empire, primarily located in Africa, South Asia, and South-East Asia though with significant islands and enclaves in the Atlantic, the Caribbean, the Far East, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific. The non-white Empire was ruled by British civil servants and their indigenous chiefly or princely collaborators, supported by low-grade indigenous staff and the all-important British-officered indigenous police and armed forces.

There were two main components within this empire of non-whites ruled by whites (or blacks ruled by blues, as one wag had it, reflecting the prevalence of Oxbridge sports 'blues' in the colonial administrative service). There was on the one hand the Indian empire, and on the other hand the colonial empire. India was ruled directly as 'British India' and indirectly through alliance with over 300 princes, each ruling his own fiefdom, supervised from London by the India Office. The Colonial Office was responsible for the scores of other territories that comprised the Empire, mostly crown colonies and protectorates though including treaty-related kingdoms and League of Nations 'mandates' (see below). The Foreign Office had a cameo role in colonial administration by virtue of its stewardship of the Sudan and other condominiums.

## Mandates and condominiums

Run in a similar manner to colonies, but occupying a different category in terms of international law, mandates were former colonies of the German and the Ottoman empires transferred to Britain at the end of the First World War. Thus Britain ruled, ‘in trust’ on behalf of the League of Nations, (part of) former German Camerouns, Iraq, Nauru, New Guinea, Palestine, South-West Africa, Tanganyika, (part of) former German Togoland, Transjordan, and Western Samoa. Another category of imperial territory in terms of legal status was the condominium, a form of joint rule with another colonial power. Thus Britain ruled the New Hebrides in conjunction with the French, and the Sudan in conjunction with the Egyptians, though in the latter case Britain was by far the senior partner by virtue of the fact that it effectively dominated Egypt too. Briefly at the end of the nineteenth century Britain jointly ruled the Samoan Islands with America and Germany, and more recently, in 2001, the British government suggested offering Spain a condominium—joint sovereignty—over Gibraltar, an idea rejected by the Gibraltarian people.

## Treaty relationships and informal empire

There were then the countries which were not formally part of the British Empire but had treaty relations with Britain making Britain responsible for their foreign affairs and their protection. In the Gulf, these included Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar as well as the seven emirates that later formed the United Arab Emirates. From 1900 until 1970 Britain had a Treaty of Friendship with Tonga in the South Pacific too. Finally, there was the ‘informal empire’, not a classification acknowledged by the British government at any juncture, but a term coined by historians to help conceptualize Britain’s relations with a number of non-Empire territories that it nevertheless had considerable influence over. In introducing this concept the renowned imperial historians Jack Gallagher and Ronald Robinson argued that the





'red on the map' formal empire was just the tip of the iceberg when considering Britain's global power and influence. Egypt provides an example: Britain only formally ruled it for eight years (1914–22) but maintained a pivotal strategic base there for nearly eighty, during which time Egypt's sovereignty was severely impaired by Britain's oversight of its foreign relations, its economic position within the country, and its enormous military presence on Egyptian soil. Throughout much of Latin America, in China, and in country's such as Persia, Britain wielded significant influence, as well as in less well-known cases, such as Chile, Thailand, and Tibet. Regimes in these regions often relied on Britain for investment and export and import markets and leaned culturally towards it too, leading to a degree of dependency that granted Britain political leverage and 'spheres of influence' beyond its actual imperial domain. The extent to which this actually translated into power equating to the power Britain wielded in its imperial domains has been contested by historians. Nevertheless, whether Britain acted as a 'big brother' or a bullying master, the concept of informal empire opened up an important new vista in terms of understanding global power relations (and it is sometimes employed by those exploring American power today).

The red on the map

In answering the question 'What was the British Empire?', its physical extent and the political nature of its constituent parts is only part of the story. We now turn to look at some of the other ways in which the Empire can be defined.

## Chapter 2

# Defining empire: key characteristics

Having defined the Empire in terms of its constituent political and juridical parts, this chapter offers a mosaic of some of the Empire's main defining features beyond its physical presence. Once beyond the 'hard edged' definition of Empire as a geopolitical entity—chunks of territory that were 'red on the map'—answers to the question 'what was the British Empire?' become less clear. This is because defining features, such as its cultural dimensions, are much more amorphous and definitions depended on individual people's experiences, which differed widely. Like any supranational entity (such as today's European Union or United Nations), the British Empire had multifaceted and contested realities, meanings, and projected images: it was in large measure an abstract. As Mark Crinson writes:

When we try to picture empire we might end up with a group of acts, objects and events—tracts of land, biscuit tins, administrative regimes, ceremonies and processions, military conquests and displacements of peoples—no single one of which can be taken to stand for empire in itself although some might be separated out as the 'hard facts' of colonialism. The reason why it is difficult to capture this heterogeneous assortment of things in an image is because empire is an abstraction, or at least as much of an abstraction as words like 'nation' or 'heritage'; empire might be used as the name of a typewriter or a music hall. But, like 'nation' or

'heritage', empire is an overarching ideological construct; it is a particular way of drawing together a host of disparate things so that their collective meaning is made apparent.

The key characteristics explored in this chapter include the Empire's economic status, its cultural dimensions, its existence as a system of knowledge and as a racial construction, its operation as a strategic alliance, its impact on built environments and the natural world, and the role played by anti-colonial opposition in its definition.

## An economic bloc and field of opportunity

The British Empire was a coherent inter-territorial trading zone, meaning that a distinct imperial economy existed and functioned as a bloc in the international economy. As well as being a trading zone, the imperial economy featured flows of capital and investment, primarily from the City of London outwards, and pooled sterling resources as London kept hold of the imperial purse-strings. Dynamic change attended the economic evolution of the Empire as what has been labelled the 'first' British Empire—a mercantile, protectionist system based on commercial regulation and trading commodities such as sugar, tobacco, furs, cotton goods, and spices—was superseded by the 'second' British Empire—a free trading, *industrial* empire which oversaw the birth of the classic metropole-periphery links between the factories of industrial Britain and scores of raw material-producing colonies that also served as export markets. This encouraged the development of peripheral economies centred on a British core; colonies produced raw materials (Australian wool, Indian cotton) that British industry could convert into finished goods for export, and they also produced the foodstuffs that fed the increasingly urban and non-agricultural British people. Argentinian beef, Canadian wheat, Australasian lamb and dairy products, South African fruit—all of these items joined the products of the earlier empire, such as sugar and tea, to

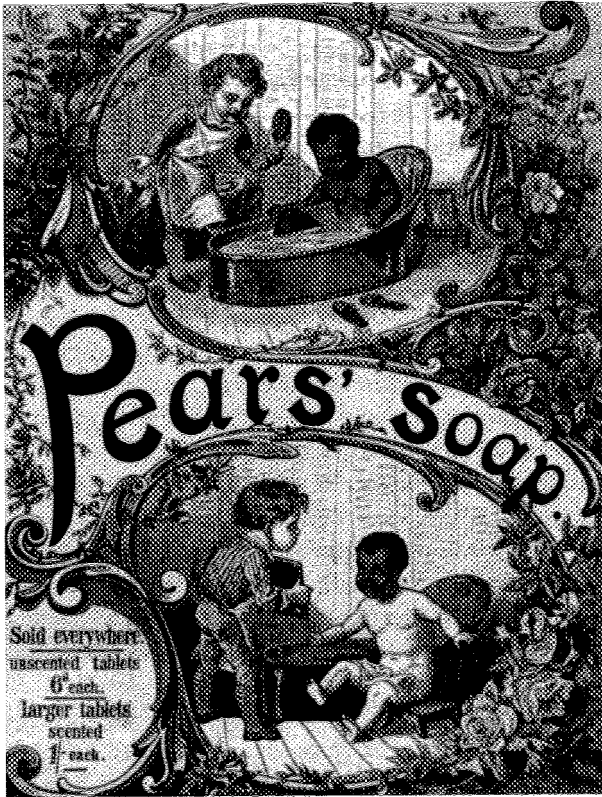
stock the British larder. African slaves were paid for with trade goods and then used to purchase North American exports, and Indian opium was used to pay for Chinese tea and silks.

The power of the British state and Britain's advanced industrial economy and institutions were the bedrock of imperial expansion and strength during the 'second' empire. The convergence of cheap labour, new transport technologies, plentiful water and coal, and captive imperial markets gave the industries of northern Britain a period of global dominance. Emigration underpinned a new division of labour in the growing international economy, one effect of which was to put new strains on native peoples everywhere, another to make transnationalism—living and identifying with more than one country or place—a normal way of life for many people. Overseas markets grew in importance in the nineteenth century, as did the resources of the Empire. The City of London became the world's financial capital, sterling the main currency of international trade. Britain's balance of payments came to depend on multilateral settlements underpinned by a distinctive pattern of specialization between exporters of manufactures and primary producers. The flow of goods, finance, and migrants was enhanced from the mid-nineteenth century by technological improvements such as railways, steamships, underwater cables, and telegraph lines. Innovations in banking and company organization helped British and multinational companies and institutions operate on a global scale and succeed in capital intensive and highly sophisticated industries such as deep level mining.

The imperial economy fostered rapid growth in tropical production and the Empire also produced key metals, including copper, gold, iron, steel, and tin. The 'imperial treasure trove' contained a host of precious raw materials, including sisal, oil, pyrethrum, oilseeds, pyrites, and sea-island cotton. In 1939 the British Empire produced a significant share of the world's total output of key raw materials: 15.6 per cent of the bauxite; 37.6 per cent of the chrome ore; 24.8 per cent of the coal; 29.8 per cent of


the copra; 17 per cent of the cotton; 12.9 per cent of the iron; 98.9 per cent of the jute; 35.9 per cent of the lead ore; 36.1 per cent of the manganese; 87.9 per cent of the nickel ore; 42.5 per cent of the palm oil; 51.9 per cent of the rubber; 39.2 per cent of the tin ore; 25.2 per cent of the tungsten ore; 34.8 per cent of the vanadium ore; 45.7 per cent of the wool; and 29 per cent of the zinc ore. Peasant agriculture, plantations, and mines were the most significant forms of imperial production. Chartered companies, cartels, and multinationals such as Anglo-Persian Oil (later BP), Cadbury, De Beers, HSBC, Tate and Lyle, and Unilever were the offspring of Britain's imperial economy and the consumer culture that it fostered. Infrastructural development in the colonies was heavily influenced by the need to extract resources as well as to provide strategic access, most noticeably in the routes of pioneering colonial road and rail networks.

Western technologies—of harbours, railways, telegraphs, hydrology, mining, and sanitation—went hand in hand with empire and its development as an economic unit, creating nodal points of transport and communication, developing new ports and cities, and opening remote hinterlands to the emerging global economy. Botanical research and cross-pollination transformed the economies of regions such as South-East Asia, as Daniel Headrick writes, whilst barrages and canals increased the agricultural output of Egypt and India and mining linked southern and central Africa to the outside world. Businesses were able to profit because the politics of empire offered them shelter. They could act and innovate in ways that would have been impossible in coherent, independent, non-Western states. Railways were built in India because of guarantees provided by the government; shipping lines flourished because of the government mail subsidies that went with them, as well as government's desire to sponsor the accumulation of vessels that could be requisitioned during times of war; cable companies received exclusive rights and subsidies; and mining companies received concessions and favourable labour laws.



5. Pears' soap advertisement, 1885. One of the most egregious examples of advertising and the association of empire with civilization, and of civilization with whiteness

The British Empire was for many people a field of opportunity—somewhere to escape to, to attempt to make oneself, to invest in, all with a range of privileges and protections by virtue of its being British ruled. James Mill famously characterized it as a 'vast system of outdoor relief for the upper classes', whilst others have emphasized its role as a field of sexual opportunity or pleasurable pursuits such as



safari. For anthropologists, archaeologists, scientists, and a host of other specialists, the Empire provided a vast laboratory in which they could experiment and enjoy rights of privileged access. The British Empire provided a field of opportunity for other Western and sometimes (when it suited British interests) non-Western actors too, such as the Tata iron and steel family, encouraged when import substitution in India became beneficial to the Empire. It was remarkably multinational; German Lutherans established themselves in South Australia; Scandinavians flocked to the American colonies; American missionaries prospered in British-created enclaves in China; and many Americans, Austrians, and Germans benefited from the Empire's investment in security and infrastructure and were able to operate within its bounds and make money from it. Its major entrepôt settlements, such as Hong Kong, Penang, and Singapore, were melting pots that nurtured the business endeavours of a multiracial entrepreneurial class. They also acted as safe havens for people fleeing oppressive regimes; Penang's population was swelled by Malays escaping Siamese attacks in Kedah, Eurasians fleeing religious persecution in Siam, Chinese moving away from Manchu oppression, and South Indians seeking a better life.

As a realm of business activity the Empire was cosmopolitan. Whilst (for instance) elements of the German press might lambast Britain for its bullying policies towards the Boers, some Germans applauded Britain's resolute action to assert order in South Africa by defeating the Boers in the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and facilitating the unfettered operations of the Randlords, the mixed nationality entrepreneurs who controlled the South African diamond and gold industries. Similarly, the political bounds that delimited the empires of other European powers were no barrier to the activities of British capital and economic forces: the British South Africa Company, for instance, was heavily involved in Portuguese East Africa and German South-West Africa. In an earlier period, war with Spain secured Britain the right to


sell slaves in the coveted Spanish American market, and British economic vigour led to the commercial penetration of the ailing Spanish Empire.

## A cultural universe

The British Empire was a cultural interface, its colonial structures forming the juncture between expanding Western culture in all its forms and an array of different indigenous cultures. The differences were immense, the impact of colonial culture varied, though usually, in one way or another, profound. As the tentacles of imperial expansion and culture bored their way into local societies and cultures, imperialism became both a disruptive and creative force. Those who provided the Empire's 'public' face, such as colonial administrators, traders, or missionaries, could affect even the most intimate realms of peoples' lives. Colonialism oversaw the penetration of Western material culture across the globe, a phenomenon of which it was both a product and a propagator. The colonial state brought bureaucracies, legal systems, modes of land tenure and marriage, educational institutions, spiritual ideas, and a degree of cultural diffusion which made its impact on everyday life deeper and more enduring than that achieved by most other empires. It significantly reshaped institutions or developed entirely new ones. It brought capitalism, with its attendant opportunities and threats, winners and losers. Whether one chose to spurn it or not, colonialism heralded economic and political changes that were bound to impact upon culture. It proclaimed an allegedly superior culture, alluringly associated with power and success. Nelson Mandela offered an insight into the meaning of being ruled by aliens: 'The education I received was a British education, in which British ideas, British culture, and British institutions were automatically assumed to be superior. There was no such thing as African culture.'

Whilst the Empire was not a cultural juggernaut, and people in remote regions and those furthest away from settlers and





urban centres might have had their lives impinged upon only erratically and indirectly, colonial rule had deep structural implications. This was partly the result of the opening of societies to Western consumer culture, to the cash economy, to aspirational lifestyles, and to new ideas of leisure and of labour. It was also born of the desire of some people to associate themselves with the culture of the ruling elite, to learn its language, to adopt its modes of dress and comportment, its marital practices and visions of domesticity, to transform themselves and perhaps their societies in beneficial ways. There were then the activities of missionaries, who deliberately set out to change the way people thought, worshipped, dressed, farmed, and lived. But the forces of imperialism did not simply breeze into distant parts of the world and reshape local identities, and empire was not alone as an engine of cultural change. New kinds of consumer habits fostered by the expansion of trade and communications were global phenomena – in Europe, as well as the non-European world – as were new forms of knowledge, both secular and spiritual.

Whilst the Empire oversaw cultural diffusion, one of its leitmotifs from the nineteenth century was a separation between European culture and that of non-Europeans. The Empire was always contradictory on this front; it wanted people to be more 'like us', but on the other hand did not want them to become *too* like us, lest this destroy their 'traditional' culture (which the British wanted to preserve) and implant the kinds of socio-economic changes that the Industrial Revolution had brought to Britain, and that many colonial administrators deplored. It was contradictory also because at the heart of imperialism lay a fundamental divide; rulers cannot allow the ruled to become *too* like them, because this would denote equality, and empires are not made up of equals. In the nineteenth century, a significant debate took place in Britain about whether the enormous population of the new Indian empire should be Anglicized or allowed to develop along its own separate lines. Thomas Macaulay, in his famous 'Minute on Education' of 1835,

urged the creation of ‘a class of person, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect’—a class of ‘brown Englishmen’. The cost of attempting to become more European could be high; becoming a Christian, it was said, meant ceasing to be an African because of the cultural changes it demanded, and there was always the chance that in the attempt a person would become a maroon, shunned by his own community whilst not accepted by the European one.

The problems with attempts to change other people were numerous: on the one hand, it was by no means an agreed-upon policy (colonial officials, for instance, rarely shared the missionaries’ enthusiasm for cultural change and would much rather leave indigenous people to their own gods, marital practices, and beliefs and concentrate solely on keeping people acquiescent and paying their taxes). Also, it was very unevenly applied, because it was left largely to private enterprise (mainly missionaries), which had finite resources. It also faltered on people’s resistance and indifference, and one of imperialism’s greatest unresolved contradictions: even those who became Europeanized were not welcomed into the fold. Educational institutions, particularly the missionary schools, public schools, and universities that the Empire created, symbolized these contradictions. Their aim to give people a British-style education was circumscribed by the fact that it could lead to demands for equality and independence, and so the education they offered needed to be controlled. The imperial enterprise could not allow education to nurture political discourse—because that always led, in the first instance, to demands for a greater share of imperial authority and then, when this was withheld, to demands for independence from British rule. These educational institutions also ignored extant systems of indigenous knowledge and education. As Eric Ashby said, British education in India excluded ‘the whole of oriental learning and religion’ and purveyed to Hindus and Muslims ‘a history and philosophy whose roots lie exclusively in the Mediterranean and in Christianity’. It

communicated ‘the examinable skeleton of European civilization without ensuring that the values and standards which give flesh to these bones are communicated too’.


Wherever they went, the British became self-appointed experts on people’s cultures. They knew best, they always claimed, how to record them, to codify them, restore them, and preserve them. They attacked indigenous practices (such as polygamy, bridewealth, and circumcision) without understanding their social function. In India they became transfixed by caste, and their imagination of it shaped the way they dealt with social structures and actually magnified its significance. In Africa, they believed that people lived in ‘tribes’, and so created them where they had not previously existed. Where something of that nature *did* already exist, they attempted to make them conform to their own codified version, helping concretize tribal identities and divisions where previously they had been more fluid mechanisms of organization and identity. It was an ironic measure of the power of empire that the British became the expert interpreters of other peoples’ cultures—even to those people themselves. Jomo Kenyatta pilloried the “professional friends of the African” who are prepared to maintain their friendship for eternity as a sacred duty, provided only that the African will continue to play the part of an ignorant savage so that they can monopolize the office of interpreting his mind and speaking for him’.

Europeans were bursting with prescriptions about how others should live, enamoured with ‘traditional’ society as a subconscious way of ‘preserving’ cultures and protecting them from the horrors of modernity, one of the great imperial paradoxes - preaching progress without change and upholding ‘superior’ European methods but discouraging indigenous peoples from ever becoming European or modern.

Recruiting for the British Army in the remote Okavango Delta in 1941, the Resident Commissioner of the Bechuanaland

Protectorate, Lieutenant-Colonel Aubrey Forsyth Thompson, reported that the people 'don't know what government is or why anyone is fighting at all'. Yet even though the Batawana people of Ngamiland clearly had limited contact with the protectorate's skeletal colonial administration, limited knowledge of its function or its relevance, and only a rudimentary conception of world events, they were nonetheless deeply affected by their colonial status. The taxes that their chiefs collected were imposed by the colonial government in far-off Mafeking, and often required contractual labour in South Africa's mineral mines in order to pay them; the cash economy, together with its new consumer goods, was a product of capitalist globalization; the 'native law and custom' that their British-created tribunals administered had been codified by a British anthropologist; and, working through their chiefs, the army recruiters obtained the manpower they needed to support imperial armies fighting Rommel in the Western Desert. Furthermore, by virtue of their subjection to an apparently distant empire and the connections to phenomena such as the international economy and world war that it forged, the availability and the price of the very food that they ate were set for them.

Imperialism and the colonial state introduced novel notions of territorial boundaries and demanded a fundamental re-imagining of space and human relationships. It critiqued, challenged, and in significant ways changed people's cultures. It introduced literacy and new concepts of medicine, spirituality, and property ownership. Imperialism imposed Western concepts and rituals of time upon indigenous populations, extending to them the dubious benefits of the twenty-four-hour clock and the Gregorian calendar. It defined their racial and ethnic categories, in ways that mattered and could seldom be ignored—if you were from one particular 'tribe', for example, you might be denied access to certain types of employment; if you were from one particular 'reserve', you might be denied access to other parts of a colony without official documentation. British rule shaped gender roles too, and propagated new concepts, such as domesticity and the benefit



of lighter complexions, spawning a range of skin-lightening products that remain popular to this day. Imperialisms' impact on identity could be striking; it firmed up ethnic boundaries, it imagined and created 'martial races', and sharpened the divide between Hindus and Muslims. Indigenous people were energetic participants in the innumerable projects of identity construction and transformation, seeking to benefit where they could, though working within British-defined parameters. It was a measure of power that, even when the British misunderstood what was going on, their faulty prognoses formed the basis of subsequent developments.

## Empire and British culture

Things flowed both ways, and British culture and identity were influenced by empire and general engagement with the wider world, from immigrants and loan words in the English language to diet, consumer goods, buildings (such as the bungalow), furniture, décor, and a range of cultural representations in literature, advertising, music, and the arts. British popular culture contained many references to the Empire and the non-European world and many British institutions had distinctly imperial dimensions, such as the monarchy, the military, and the church, clubs, societies, and schools, innumerable associations and leagues, missionary societies, museums, theatres, and businesses. Through them all, knowledge of the non-European world was gathered and then presented to the British public.

In terms of the Empire's impact on British culture, there has been great debate in recent years. Some historians have claimed that British culture was 'steeped' or 'saturated' in imperialism, the very concept of British nationality dependent upon it. Empire is said to have played an integral part in metropolitan values, thoughts, ideas, and practices. Catherine Hall argues that empire was part of everyday life for Britons between the late eighteenth century and the end of the Second World War, John MacKenzie that empire



**6. Aboriginal dancers perform for Queen Elizabeth II during her visit to Clontarf Aboriginal college in Perth, Australia, 2011. The Queen's sixteenth official visit to Australia—she first visited on the Empire Tour that followed her coronation—it was timed to coincide with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. The association of the monarchy with the Empire was cemented by Victoria and her son Edward VII, and his son George V. The monarchy and the Commonwealth are among the most visible legacies of empire**

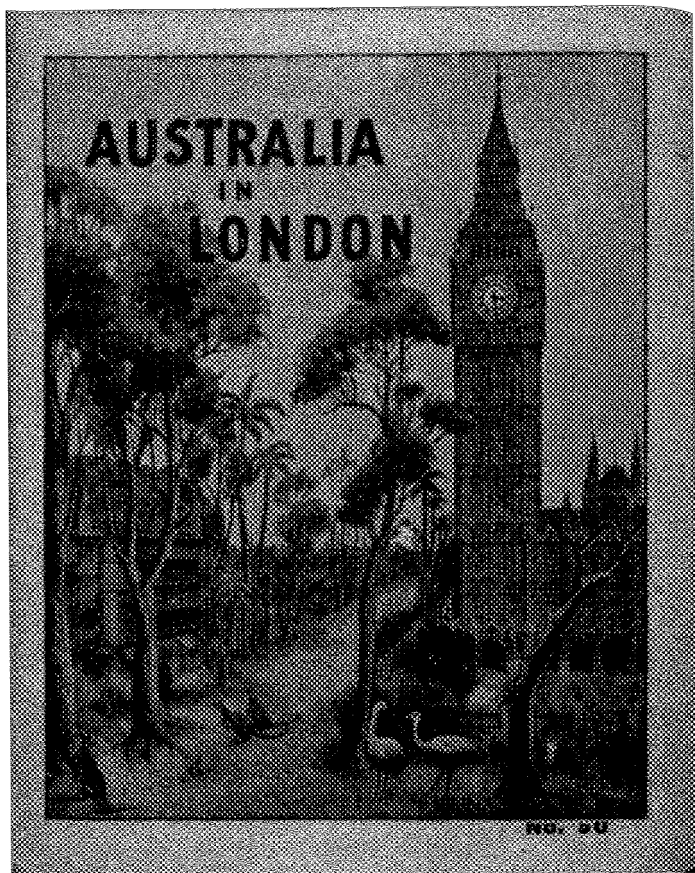
constituted a vital aspect of national identity and race consciousness, even if complicated by regional, rural, urban, and class contexts. Others, notably Bernard Porter, claim that it was much less significant, and that proponents of the opposite view risk overcompensating for the previous neglect of the subject of empire's impact upon Britain by seeing empire in everything. Empire, this side of the debate claims, was irrelevant for most Britons most of the time. However much they may have been surrounded by evidence of empire, 'ordinary' British people, they argue, were unlikely to interrogate it, or connect it all up. Ronald Hyam claims that his generation was much more concerned about dodging German rockets and avoiding nuclear destruction than

about the Empire, and writes that if someone had mentioned the Empire when he was a schoolboy, he would have assumed they meant the Chiswick Empire, a nearby cinema.

Whilst it is necessary to be cautious when considering what people in the past thought, about Britain's place in the world, about empire, about non-Europeans, this should not prevent careful assessment. Like other turf wars within the field of imperial history, protagonists on both sides sometimes talk past each other, and historical cockfighting can obscure common ground. Surely it is not too much to say that during the days of empire many British people looked down upon non-British people. Others, who may have had no particular opinion, acquiesced in the formulation of a puissant world view based upon superiority and right to a sufficient extent that it did not hinder the operation of imperial rule. Few British people would have considered an African 'tribesman' an equal; perhaps an equal before God, but not as 'developed' and probably in need of the uplift that British rule purported to bestow.

A wide constituency saw Britain's fate as tied up with its overseas interests and assumed the unchallengeable right of British migrants abroad to seize the lands of indigenous people. 'It can hardly be doubted that the sense of being part of a larger political world extending far beyond Britain was very widely diffused... [E]ntrenched vested interests, often commanding a loud public voice, could play upon this awareness of a "greater" Britain on whose power and prestige "little" England depended. But they could not assume a broad public sympathy for all types of empire and on every occasion. Nor of course did the "imperial interest" speak with one voice or express a single concern'.

British culture was significantly influenced by imperialism and the perspectives on the non-European world that it bred. This holds true even as one agrees with the sceptics that the majority of the public were ignorant about the specifics of empire and that, beyond certain upper classes and groups of people with empire-related lives, most



7. Australia in London, advertisement for cure-all 'bile beans'. c. 1900 and an example of representations of the wider world in British culture.

people were disinterested in it. The important point is that *because of*, not despite, this general lack of interest or commitment, empire could exist and expand. All it required was a general level of acceptance—and this meant something much more fundamental than specific knowledge of empire or interest in it. It meant an imperial world view, one that acquiesced in colonization and possession of empire, seeing nothing remarkable in it, and possibly



good things associated with it. This world view was founded on widely held if inchoate assumptions about European, and particularly British, superiority, of the alien-ness and frequently the backwardness of non-Europeans who, in turn, needed to be aided by those more civilized, or at least set to one side so that their resources could be exploited for the benefit of mankind. Increasingly, this was a world view predicated upon racial hierarchies. If these ideas were less practically significant in Britain itself, they were hugely significant in the large portions of the earth under the sway of British settlers. The burgeoning settler states were premised on the decline, subjugation, and dispossession of their indigenous inhabitants. Not to compute that as a fundamental aspect of an imperial culture is to lose sight of the wood for the trees.

## A system of knowledge

Tony Ballantyne argues that empire ‘was not simply about extending informal political influence, establishing economic domination, or securing sovereignty, but it was a much broader set of asymmetrical relationships grounded in the desire of the colonizer to exert mastery over the colonized society, its natural and human resources, and its cultural forms. As a part of this, imperialists frequently appropriated indigenous knowledge as they generated “colonial knowledge”, produced out of and enabling resource exploitation, commerce, conquest, and colonization.’ The authority of colonial states rested on their ability to collate and distil knowledge of local terrains and cultures in maps, ethnographies, grammars, botanical drawings, legal codes, encyclopedias, research centres, specimens, and censuses. Through these processes, for example, Indian words, artefacts, and identities ‘were wrenched out of their indigenous context and fashioned into new bodies of knowledge that served the needs of the British, but often bore little relation to indigenous reality’. Empires were important vectors for the development and spread of Western science and other forms of specialist endeavour. Cartography was important in surveying for military campaigns, tax assessment, and the projection of the idea

of India as a unified political unit. Medicine, despite claims of scientific neutrality, was embedded in imperial structures of domination, and communications technology was crucial to the power of the colonial state.

## A racial construction

The British Empire was a racial construct in which whites were of higher status than non-whites. Wherever one travelled in the Empire, the white person was the sahib, tuan, baas, bwana, or master—whatever his station and whatever he might have been called behind his back. The British were often distant and arrogant, especially once Victorian decorum and morals, and Britain's growing power, confidence, and sense of mission, had opened a chasm between Britons and 'natives', eradicating earlier habits that were often more relaxed, respectful, and intermingled. The British were exceedingly proprietorial—it was 'their' Empire, their playground, and they were the ruling race even if only a minor functionary in a department store or a private soldier. The stentorian cry of 'Boy! Whisky-soda!' echoed in all the Empire's clubs. The British behaved, for example, as if they owned Kenya, which to all intents and purposes they did once they had purloined the 'White' Highlands and other choice tracts of land; they walked supreme through the streets of Cairo and took the Pyramids as their own special place in which to picnic and frolic. They could emigrate if things went bad at home or they needed an escape or just an adventure. The sense of British proprietorship leaps off the pages of contemporary memoirs and novels. In the colonial world, the British were monarchs of all they surveyed; and it was their impregnable air of entitlement that so vexed and goaded indigenous people, especially those who were themselves diminished or emasculated leaders of society as a result of British rule. Across the globe imperialism constructed 'the native', and whether he was a 'child-like' or 'lascivious' African, an 'inscrutable' Chinese man, or an 'effeminate' Bengali, he was the living opposite of the white man. 'The natives' were simply part of the scenery, the

very term itself denoting a stolid backwardness inviting Western improvement and dynamism, as well as attachment to the soil that the aliens now sought to control. Even for those who did not share this view, even for those who purported wholeheartedly to love and admire other cultures, it was very common to adopt the position, often unthinkingly, that they needed European help, reform, restitution, or civilization. This was a prevalent way of viewing the world at the time, common in all Western societies. British people out in the colonies lived with themselves as colonialists because of their deep and abiding sense of *paternalism*, the belief that they were genuinely helping people who needed it.

Non-whites *could* achieve some social and economic advancement, and those of high birth usually constituted an elite, partnering the British as junior participants in the business of rule, administration, and economic activity. But even members of the elite, even the ultra-rich who had schooled at Eton, might be denied membership of the highest-ranking clubs, or might be barred on 'Europeans only' days. And even they, whilst co-opted and woven into the fabric of the imperial great chain of being through honours and gun salutes and coronations or Empire Day parades, were still kept at arm's length, no matter how 'loyal' they were (a key imperial litmus test). Walking across the grounds of the exclusive Gezira Sporting Club in Cairo, the young Edward Said had what he termed an 'explicit colonial encounter'. He ran into the Club Secretary, an Englishman called Mr Pilley, who believed he was trespassing. 'Don't answer back, boy', said the brown-suited, pith-helmeted Mr Pilley, after Said had tried to explain that his father was a club member. 'Just get out, and do it quickly. Arabs aren't allowed here, and you're an Arab!' 'If I hadn't thought of myself as an Arab before', Said wrote, 'I now directly grasped the significance of the designation as truly disabling.'

Whilst hierarchy and class were significant prisms through which colonial peoples were perceived and ranked, race was key. As the nineteenth century developed, pseudo-scientific 'proof' of

non-European inferiority became influential, fusing with a common assumption of Anglo-Saxon superiority. There was a new emphasis on race as an explanation and justification of inequality and difference. Attitudes changed quickly. In the space of three decades, for instance, the humanitarian, paternalist assumptions that had influenced the decision to colonize New Zealand had given way to ideas about the inevitability of Maori defeat at the hands of the racially superior settlers. This pattern can be traced in the fate of the Treaty of Waitangi: conceived in 1840 as an instrument to curtail the excesses of the invaders, by 1877 it had been declared a 'simple nullity' by New Zealand Chief Justice James Prendergast, having been signed 'between a civilized nation and a group of savages'.

## A strategic and military system

The British Empire was a strategic and military system. What became known as 'imperial defence' (there was a Cabinet Committee of Imperial Defence from the early twentieth century) was founded for most of the Empire's lifespan upon the global power of the Royal Navy, based on dominance in home waters to secure Britain against invasion and a large overseas base infrastructure including control of the world's key waterways and maritime choke points (the Suez Canal, the western entrance to the Mediterranean, the Cape of Good Hope, the Straits of Malacca). Alongside the navy, army garrisons were responsible for the security of colonial borders and 'internal security', which meant suppressing rebellions and 'illicit' political movements. The garrisons provided defensive capabilities for important bases, and a 'firefighting' capability for deployment should trouble break out in a particular region. They were supplied by a British Army rarely more than 200,000 strong in peacetime, though supplemented by a unique asset, the Indian Army, and a gallimaufry of colonial forces such as the Transjordan Frontier Force, the South Persia Rifles, the New South Wales Corps, the Northern Rhodesia Regiment, the Fiji Volunteer Force, and the Hong Kong and

Singapore Garrison Artillery. These land forces were vital, because the expansion of empire and the suppression of innumerable uprisings meant that throughout its history 'savage wars' or 'pacification' campaigns, to use the loaded language of the time, were always ongoing. In the twentieth century, these forces were joined by air force squadrons pre-positioned to defend the Empire against external aggression and, as a 'swift agent of government', to share the burdens of colonial policing with the army and navy. During the world wars of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, colonial manpower resources were hugely important, as were the Empire's fleets and squadrons in the major oceans.

Whilst resting on its armed forces and in particular British mastery at sea, the Empire's security also rested on alliances with other great powers, most notably Japan (from 1902 until the 1920s), France (from 1904 until the collapse of France in 1940), and on America in the post-Second World War years. There were always major tensions afflicting imperial defence. Did the possession of overseas outposts make Britain stronger, or merely present it with innumerable defensive nightmares? Such concerns were epitomized by the agonizing over the construction of a new naval base at Singapore, and the eventual failure of the 'Singapore strategy' to defend the eastern empire because, when it needed a strong fleet, Britain's naval resources were tied up defending Britain itself. The tension between an imperial strategy and a continental one informed Britain's defence policy deep into the post-war period. British governments until the 1950s equated the maintenance and defence of empire as crucial to Britain's status as a world power. Others argued that the need to maintain large defence forces, meanwhile, damaged the British economy.

The British Empire was founded, ultimately, on force. Though there was never force available everywhere, and collaborative relationships and the skill of district officials were the day-to-day backbone of the system, *force was certainly present*, even if it was

latent. Those who rebelled against the authority of the British Empire tended to find this out the hard way. A gunboat might be dispatched, a company, battalion, brigade or even a division might be sent against them, depending on the scale of the ‘unrest’ (a common colonial catch-all euphemism) and the prowess of the insurgents, malcontents, rebels, recalcitrants, or terrorists (to plunder the colonial lexicon of terms used to delegitimize opponents). Rebellions were ruthlessly crushed, from the Indian Mutiny to the Mau Mau Emergency. Enemy states and peoples were defeated, from Tippoo Tib to the Mahdi, the Emperor of Burma, and the Boer republics. Uncooperative chiefs, princes, kings, and prime ministers were deposed (and often exiled, usually to remote islands), a lengthy list that came to include the Zulu king Cetshwayo, the Shah of Persia Reza Pahlavi, Egypt’s Arabi Pasha, Tshekedi Khama of the Bangwato, the last Moghul emperor Bahadur Shah II, Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus, the Iraqi prime minister Rashid Ali, and the Kandyan king Sri Vikrama Rajasinha. As a related index of imperial power, Britain successfully *disarmed* local polities, and gathered to itself a monopoly of lethal force.

The Empire demonstrated its power to move people and command them most vigorously during times of war, when Whitehall’s leash was tightened and every colonial territory, no matter how remote or inhospitable, did as it was bid and provided manpower and material for the war effort. The utilization of imperial resources between 1939 and 1945, for example, represented an astonishing display of imperial power and demonstrated Britain’s capacity to conscript and to command. The point is that although the ‘dread of our power’ was always in part illusory, it was *never* wholly so.

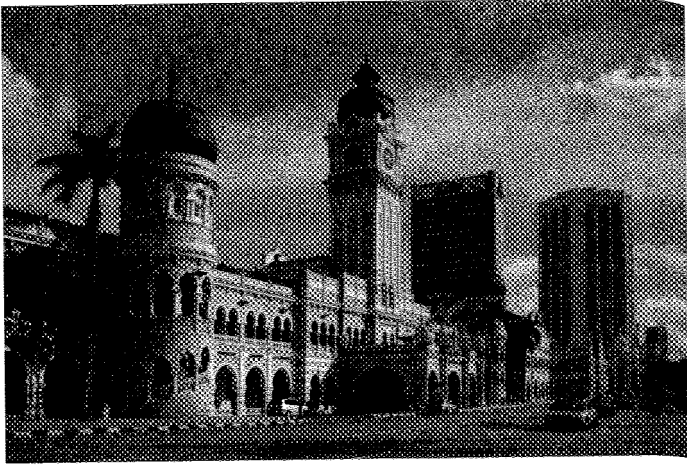
## A transformer of the natural world and the built environment

The Empire’s globality linked disparate lands, peoples, and species in an unprecedented manner. The growth of the British

Empire created entirely new cities, states, and federations and led to a profound transformation of the natural world.

Empire oversaw an astonishing global transplantation and cross-fertilization as flora, fauna, and microbes were promiscuously moved from one region to another, not always intentionally. Native species were decimated as 'English' trees, shrubs, birds, fish, rodents, and livestock were introduced. 'Useless' plants were exterminated so that productive ones, such as eucalyptus, could be planted. The expansion of cattle- and sheep-farming in Australia and South Africa introduced colonial administrators to the problems of exploitation and control. Like other migrant peoples, wherever the British went their cash crops, food crops, and livestock went with them. The development of plantations, national parks, farmlands, and pasturelands across the world was the direct result of European settlement and its commercial, agricultural, 'sporting', and conservation activities. Whilst shooting the game out of vast tracts of southern Africa, their imported rabbits wreaked havoc among Australia's grasslands, and their tea and rubber plantations transformed landscapes in Asia and South-East Asia. The development of botanical gardens around the world marked the search for lucrative crops and valuable plants, as well as the desire to collect and classify all living things, to identify and to tame the 'exotic', to rationalize the seemingly irrational.

Agricultural activities, extensive plant and animal transfers, forestry, irrigation, and flood control were areas of extensive endeavour in the British Empire. There was a constant tension between the desire to conserve—the Empire can claim some of the most important pioneering work in terms of environmental conservation—and the desire to produce and to profit. A growing body of men of science, through their researches in colonial settings, especially botanical gardens, began to warn of the fragility and exhaustibility of the natural world, though few were prepared to heed them. Others experienced a Pauline conversion, such as Colonel R. W. Burton, a leading exponent of shikar (tiger



**8. The colonial built environment: The Sultan Abdul Samad Building, Merdeka Square, Kuala Lumpur.** Constructed as the administrative centre of the state of Selangor and named after its then Sultan, the clock tower ('Big Ben') first chimed to coincide with the celebration of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897. It frames the padang of Merdeka Square along with other colonial era buildings, including the Royal Selangor Club and St Mary's Cathedral. Redolent of the days of empire, this space has become central to Malaysia's national identity, as it was here that the Union Flag was lowered in 1957

hunting) before realizing how much the tiger population had dwindled and becoming instead a leading conservationist. Such people sought to turn the Empire from plunder to preservation, sometimes invoking wonky science in the process. Frequently the British discovered, 'scientifically', that indigenous habits and practices endangered environments, so set about separating them. Thus, for example, in the Nilgiri Hills the alleged predations of the indigenous population were stopped so that forests could be scientifically improved, resulting in increased timber felling for the market and increased tax revenue for the colonial state. Environmentally, the British were adept at finding out what was 'wrong' with indigenous practices, whilst failing to find any fault in their own.



As well as transforming the natural world, the British Empire oversaw, in a relatively short space of time, astonishing additions to the world's built environment. The layout and zoning of scores of cities and ports around the world is entirely imperial. They mark the international landscape to this day, but might very well, when one thinks about it, not have existed at all. The baronial mansion set down in the African bush or the genesis of 'Western' society in distant Australia epitomize this strangeness, as did the utter bizarreness of English towns cropping up in the foothills of the Himalayas: Chinese merchants from Yarkand, who had travelled over the snow covered ranges to Simla in 1847, were astonished at the sight of a substantial British settlement where logically there should only have been a small Indian village. One can imagine their disorientation. The equivalent, if the imperial boot had ever been on the other foot, would have been thatched rondavels in Wiltshire, or a pagoda rearing its eaves on the Thames embankment. It was madness, really, the sheer incongruity of it all. Tasmania, an island on the other side of the world, had its indigenous population eradicated and replaced by British settlers who soon divided their new homeland into English parishes (Wessex, Essex, Monmouthshire) containing towns and villages named after their British progenitors (Devonport, Launceston, Swansea). What is more, the incongruity does not diminish with time, because the processes of colonization affected such fundamental transformations. Thus to this day Tasmania feels like an English county (Cornwall's long-lost neighbour say). It is firmly part of the 'Western' world despite its extremely 'eastern' location, and its native inhabitants will never come back.

## A constantly contested realm

The British Empire was always defined by opposition and the fissiparousness common to all empires and the struggles between nationalism and imperialism that they incubate. From its earliest foundations, fledgling communities of white settlers argued with royally appointed governors about the degree of 'freedom' from

London's control they had a right to enjoy, some defining themselves in opposition to Britain and the British government. If imperial subjects of *British* birth could bridle at imperial control, it is no surprise that those not of British origin, especially when brought forcibly within the Empire's bounds, were apt to contest imperial authority too. Rebellions were frequent, some of the most notable ones mounted by the Empire's white subjects, such as Afrikaners, French Canadians, Irish, and Rhodesians, as well as Egyptians, Indians, Jamaicans, Kikuyu, Iraqis, Malayan Chinese, and Sudanese.

Be it nineteenth-century commentators exercised by the moral dilemmas attached to the sudden acquisition of vast numbers of Indian subjects (would it breed autocratic habits at home?), missionaries bemoaning the evil effects of the opium trade or drawing attention to the 'red rubber' scandal in the Congo, or nationalist critics and activists such as Gandhi, empire was always contested and its manifestations critiqued. The public perception of empire was heavily influenced by the activities of such people, and by the Empire's major reverses, all associated with resistance to British rule, such as the American Revolution, the Indian Mutiny, the Morant Bay mutiny in Jamaica, heavy defeats in Afghanistan and Zululand, the two Boer wars, the Easter Rising in Ireland, risings in Egypt, India, and Iraq at the end of the First World War, and the insurgencies of the 1950s. Colonial administrations and settlers in certain parts of the Empire suffered from a 'rising psychosis', fearing rebellion and always striving to detect the first signs, a measure of the alienness of their rule and their distance from the indigenous people.

The twentieth century became famous for the actions of nationalists and their diverse political parties and movements, from the Jewish Agency to the Muslim League and the Rhodesia Front. They trip off the tongue in a veritable alphabet soup of acronyms: ANC, BDP, INC, IRA, KANU, MCP, TANU, ZANU, ZAPU. Their colourful leaders often became household names,



**9. Nationalism and political protest, key solvents of empire:  
Protesters supporting Zimbabwean independence demonstrate  
against the Conservative government's handling of the Rhodesia talks,  
November 1979, Trafalgar Square, London**

men such as Gerry Adams, Aung San, Banda, Gandhi, Jinnah, Kenyatta, Makarios, Mandela, Mintoff, Mugabe, Nasser, Nehru, Nkomo, and Nkrumah. Some of the most powerful condemnations of empire came from former colonial officials such as George Orwell and Leonard Woolf, who thought it absurd for one civilization to try to impose its rule upon an entirely different one. Throughout its history the British Empire's character was heavily marked by the activities of opponents and critics, including left-wing intellectuals and proponents of the United Nations idea or the cause of racial equality. As British society became more democratic and liberal and as international society became more egalitarian and international law came to favour the principle of self-determination, ruling an empire became less and less sustainable.