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THE IMPERIAL CENTURY

Britain's motives in seeking control and influence in non-Western societies changed considerably during the course of the imperial century. In the wake of thirty years of warfare that left their continental rivals in political and economic disarray, the British emerged from the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1814 as the world's premier industrial and commercial power. Although this economic process sent it to the far corners of the globe in search of markets and raw materials in the mid-nineteenth century, Britain could rely on free trade and informal influence to protect its interests because it had the playing field essentially all to itself.

The era of British economic supremacy lasted from the early nineteenth century until the 1870s, when Britain's newly industrialized European rivals turned their attention overseas. Faced with increased (and largely unexpected) pressure from competition, Britain moved to acquire formal control over regions of the world that it deemed economically or strategically important. British imperialists still preferred the economy of formal influence to the expense of direct administration. Yet in cases in which they saw no alternative to formal rule, they suddenly faced the difficult task of governing millions of non-European subjects with whom they had little in common. Thus British policy in the imperial century shifted from the older mercantilistic style of imperialism that survived until the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the era of informal imperial influence in the mid-nineteenth century, and finally to the grudging embrace of formal empire in the early 1880s.

SETTLEMENT COLONIES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE OLD EMPIRE

Britain's first empire consisted largely of holdings in India, South Africa, the West Indies, and North America, which it won during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From an economic standpoint, it was organized along mercantilistic principles, which assumed that colonies existed primarily for the economic benefit of the imperial metropole. Mercantilists measured a nation's wealth by its holdings of gold and silver. They sought to conserve precious metal reserves through regulated trade in which colonies supplied raw materials in return for finished products manufactured in the home country. In the eighteenth century, Britain enforced this closed system through exclusive tariffs and legal preferences like the Navigation Laws, which required important American colonial products (cotton, sugar, tobacco, and indigo) to be exported to British ports on British ships. Most of Britain's overseas commerce was carried out by the British East India Company and other chartered companies, which paid the Crown for an exclusive monopoly on all forms of trade in a given region. These restrictive and unequal systems of exchange engendered considerable hostility among colonists in North America and were a primary cause of the American Revolution.

Growing opposition to mercantilism also mounted in metropolitan Britain at the beginning of the imperial century. The mechanization of textile and hardware production allowed British manufacturers to turn out large quantities of goods much more cheaply than their competitors. Generally speaking, the French, Germans, and Americans did not begin to industrialize until the 1830s and 1840s. Although this head start expanded and enriched the great industrial cities of Manchester, Sheffield, and Birmingham in central and northern Britain, it also made the British economy increasingly dependent on international trade. Since British consumers could not absorb their country's increased industrial output, manufacturers had to look to foreign markets. Furthermore, the British textile industry, which accounted for almost half of Britain's total exports in the 1840s, was almost entirely dependent on imports of raw cotton. Thus Britain's economic health in the early to middle nineteenth century was linked to unfettered international commerce.

Mercantilism's restrictive system of tariffs and monopolies was incompatible with Britain's new emphasis on free markets. Reformers like

Richard Cobden, a radical Member of Parliament, worked to repeal the Corn Laws, which protected privileged agricultural interests by inflating food prices through restrictions on imports of inexpensive foreign grain. Cobden and his supporters allied themselves with industrialists and merchants who were growing equally frustrated with government interference in the free flow of commerce. In 1834 this coalition helped repeal the Navigation Acts and in the 1840s, the Corn Laws. These measures played a role in nearly tripling the volume and value of British trade by 1860. On the other hand, the influx of cheap grain severely damaged the British agricultural sector, and by the late nineteenth century Britain was heavily dependent on imported food.

Thus Britain's security and economic prosperity depended on its ability to balance foreign sales of its manufactured goods with its purchases of food and raw materials. When the volume of Britain's imports surpassed its exports of manufactured goods, the nation relied on service industries to balance its accounts. These "invisible exports" included shipping, insurance, engineering, and international banking. Britain also depended heavily on returns from investments in the developing economies of Europe and North America. Although these factors transformed London into the world's premier center of banking and finance over the course of the imperial century, they reinforced Britain's dependence on the free flow of commerce and capital.

In addition to being committed to free trade, reformers attacked the institution of slavery as an unfree form of labor. In this struggle they were joined by Christian evangelicals, who viewed slavery as immoral, and a faction of British Conservatives who considered it dishonorable. Britain's abolitionist campaign was led by Thomas Fowell Buxton's Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and was centered largely in the northern industrial cities, where almost half a million people signed petitions calling for an end to the slave trade. This effort succeeded in banning the transport of slaves on British ships in 1807 and won the total abolition of slavery on British territory in 1833. These changes undermined the profitability of Britain's sugar-producing colonies. British slave owners in the West Indies and on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius received over £20 million in compensation from the British government for the loss of their human "property" but were faced with the difficult prospect of transforming the former slaves into a sufficiently disciplined paid workforce.

These political and economic changes transformed Britain's first overseas empire. The loss of the thirteen North American colonies demonstrated the political danger of trying to force British settlers to remain within the mercantile system, and the abolition of slavery and the adoption of free trade raised serious questions about the overall value of the remaining colonies. With the exception of India, which still generated considerable revenue from land taxes, the old colonies appeared to cost more than they were worth.

This was particularly true in West Africa, since the robust disease environment in Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Lagos, and the Gold Coast made extensive European settlement a virtual impossibility. Long known as the "white man's grave," the West African coast was home to a host of endemic diseases, including dysentery, typhoid, yellow fever, and malaria. More than three quarters of the British soldiers of the Royal Africa Corps stationed in the Gambia and the Gold Coast between 1819 and 1836 died of disease, and only a handful of the survivors were sufficiently fit for further duty. Most British imperialists therefore avoided extended stays in West Africa until medical advances in the mid-nineteenth century made the region more habitable for Europeans.

As for the remaining colonies in North America and Australia, Britain's growing industrial and commercial supremacy so diminished the threat of foreign competition that British politicians found it easy to shift the burden of local administration to local settler populations. In North America, the British government sought to correct some of the problems that led to the American Revolution by granting limited representative government to its remaining colonies in Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec), New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. By rewarding the approximately 40,000 loyalist refugees from the original thirteen colonies with land grants and encouraging increased immigration from Britain, British officials also hoped to assimilate the population of the former French colony of Lower Canada. They also hoped that representative government would give both French and English speakers a greater incentive to remain within the British imperial sphere.

Immigration increased the population of British North America from 250,000 people in 1791 to more than 1.5 million just six decades later. As a result, population pressure in the eastern colonies drove the western settlement of the Northwest Territories, which were the reserve

of the Hudson's Bay Company, a chartered company that held a royal monopoly on the region's lucrative fur trade. In the Pacific Northwest, Vancouver Island was the first territory to slip from Company control in the 1840s, and twenty years later survey parties of scientists and geographers deemed the Canadian prairie suitable for settlement and intense cultivation.

In the South Pacific a similar pattern of expansion and settlement took place in Australia at the beginning of the imperial century. The initial colonization of the territories of New South Wales and Tasmania in the late eighteenth century was driven primarily by an effort to empty Britain's crowded jails by deporting criminals overseas. The British government favored transportation (as the practice came to be known) because it offered a "humane" alternative to capital punishment, which was a common penalty for a host of minor crimes in eighteenth-century Britain. It also provided a source of cheap labor for the handful of free settlers who followed the deportees to Australia. On the whole, approximately 160,000 men, women, and children were sent to Australia as convicts by the 1860s.

Although the rate of transportation declined as humanitarians and abolitionists attacked the practice as a form of slavery, the initial wave of forced penal immigration was augmented by almost 100,000 free settlers who took advantage of sponsored colonization programs beginning in the 1830s. They were joined by a following wave of prospectors drawn by the gold rush of 1851. British officials in London had little interest in devoting their limited resources to subsidizing settlers, but individual colonial governments in Australia offered cash bounties to attract a better type of settler. Hoping to create a class of self-reliant yeoman farmers, they offered bounties of as much as £30 to encourage young, respectable married couples to emigrate. On the other end of the spectrum, imperial propagandist Edward Gibbon Wakefield sought to re-create the rural British gentry in the colonies by raising land prices to create a class of wealthy landholders and a subordinate class of tenants. Neither plan came to full fruition, but together they accelerated the rate of free settlement substantially by diminishing Australia's reputation as a land of convicts.

Finally, New Zealand was the only significant new settlement colony that Britain acquired over the course of the imperial century. British explorers, whalers, and merchants had regular contacts with New

Zealand dating back to the mid-eighteenth century, but the presence of the Maori, a numerous, well-organized, and militaristic people, made the islands an unsuitable site for a British penal colony. The few British traders and missionaries who settled in New Zealand before the imperial century did so under the protection of local Maori chiefs rather than the Crown.

The British government did very little to directly encourage the formal settlement and colonization of New Zealand. It willingly stood by while the initial efforts of private companies to settle the territory failed as a result of Maori hostility and opposition from the humanitarian lobby in Britain, and it was not until 1839 that Edward Gibbon Wakefield's New Zealand Colonization Company finally established a permanent settlement on the North Island. The rate of immigration increased dramatically once this foothold was firmly established, and by 1850 the British population of New Zealand numbered approximately 25,000 people.

Yet the mere presence of large numbers of British settlers was not enough to force the British government to overcome its unwillingness to incur the cost of adding territory to its formal empire. Interestingly enough, New Zealand became a British protectorate because British missionaries and the local British Resident (who had no official authority) succeeded in convincing the Colonial Office that the growing community of merchants, whalers, seal hunters, military deserters, and land speculators threatened to plunge the islands into anarchy. In 1840, local officials persuaded Maori leaders to become British subjects in return for vague guarantees that they would retain title to their land. In practice, the Treaty of Waitangi, as the agreement came to be known, allowed British land speculators to exploit Maori institutions of communal land tenure by buying or seizing large sections of the North Island. The Maori clashed with the British army in the 1860s in an attempt to stem the rising tide of settlers, but their inevitable defeat gave the settler leaders an excuse to seize an additional 3 million acres of land from the "treasonous" rebels.

It should be kept in mind, however, that colonial officials in London had no direct interest in dispossessing the Maori. The settlers and land speculators succeeded in transforming New Zealand into a crown colony by compelling the British government to protect the lives and property of British citizens. In doing so, they maneuvered Britain into

acquiring a new settlement colony at a time when most British imperialists had little desire to add remote overseas regions to their formal empire.

Faced with the expense of administering and defending its growing settlement colonies in North America, Australia, and New Zealand, the British government began to explore ways to allow the settlers to take more responsibility for managing their local affairs. Under what became known as "responsible government" it made the royal governors and ministers of those colonies with sufficient economical maturity and financial stability responsible to a locally elected assembly. In granting responsible government to the North American colonies beginning in the 1840s, British officials were partially motivated by fears that the slow pace of political progress might inspire them to seek annexation by the United States. With a precedent firmly established, they extended the same privilege to New Zealand and Australian colonies a decade later (although the governor of New Zealand retained responsibility for dealing with the Maori).

With responsible government firmly established, the British government also encouraged the various colonies in North America and Australia to join together in larger political units to foster even greater self-sufficiency in economic development and defense. In 1867, the colonies of Upper and Lower Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick combined to form the nucleus of modern Canada. The new confederation facilitated westward expansion and reduced the chance that Britain might have to protect its North American colonies from a hostile United States angered by British support for the South during the U.S. Civil War. The Australian territories did not join together until 1901, when the threat of German and French expansion in the South Pacific convinced the individual colonies to surrender their autonomy to a larger federation. The British government retained control of both Australian and Canadian international relations and had the prerogative of vetoing discriminatory tariffs on British imports.

Britain was less willing to grant responsible government to its African territories and the West Indian sugar colonies. Concerned about the southern African Cape Colony's treatment of its non-European population, British officials granted the territory "representative" rather than "responsible" government in 1853. Under this system, the British governor retained a greater degree of authority over a locally elected assem-

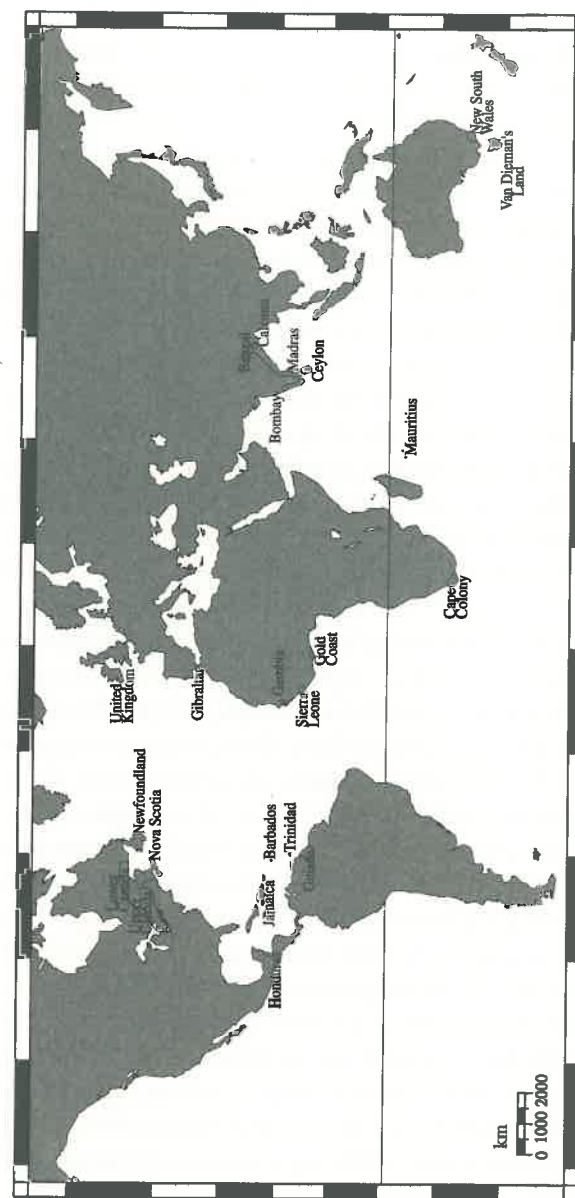
bly. Conversely, the Caribbean planters voluntarily surrendered their right to responsible government to the Colonial Office in the 1860s because they were afraid of being swamped by a non-European electorate composed largely of freed slaves.

THE ERA OF INFORMAL EMPIRE

Britain's imperial policy in the mid-nineteenth century was shaped largely by confidence in its industrial and commercial might. Free trade advocates assumed that the mutual benefits of unfettered commerce would usher in an era of world peace. Britain avoided the wave of revolutions that swept across Europe in the 1830s and 1840s, and the final defeat of Napoleon virtually eliminated the French naval threat to Britain's overseas trade. In fact, Britain's ability to embrace a policy of free trade and informal imperialism was almost entirely due to the lack of serious foreign rivals. British governments could make up for the budget deficits that resulted from the end of protectionist legislation and high tariffs only by cutting defense costs. Thus, even though Britain was the world's only global military power during the imperial century, its prosperity was largely dependent on world peace.

British politicians were continually forced to weigh the use of military action against the forced economy brought on by their commitment to low tariffs and free trade. These stringent economic realities sparked an intense debate in British imperial and political circles over the worth of formal empire. Although few questioned the value of British India, Richard Cobden, John Bright, and other free trade enthusiasts of what became known as the Manchester School argued that Britain's remaining dependent colonies were an unnecessary expense. They were willing to sanction the use of force only to compel non-European states and societies to open their markets to British trade.

A few of the most extreme opponents of formal empire argued that Britain should actually abandon its most expensive overseas holdings. In 1865, Sir Charles Adderley stood in Parliament to attack Britain's small West African colonies for their inability to contribute to the cost of imperial defense. He charged that the value of British trade in these territories did not offset the cost of their administration and complained that tensions with local African rulers drew Britain into unnecessary and ex-



Map 2.1 The British Empire, c. 1815

pensive conflicts. In response to Adderley's criticisms, Parliament convened a special committee, which recommended withdrawal from all West African territories except the colony of liberated slaves in Sierra Leone.

Although the committee's proposals never came to pass, they illustrated the widespread indifference (if not outright hostility) of many influential British politicians toward formal empire. In spite of this official resistance to acquiring new dependencies, the British Empire grew at a rate of nearly 100,000 square miles per year during the mid-nineteenth century. With the exception of the relatively insignificant Greek Ionian Islands, Britain did not surrender a single acre of overseas territory during this period. Although most British imperialists may have resisted taking on the financial burden of governing new colonies, they were not opposed to acquiring small strategically or economically important islands and bases like the Falklands off the coast of Argentina, Aden on the tip of Arabia, and the port of Hong Kong in coastal China. Britain also expanded and consolidated its hold over India during the era of informal empire.

Furthermore, British commercial and political leaders were usually willing to use military force to expand their informal economic and social influence overseas. Britain's Opium Wars with China in 1839 and 1856 were intended primarily to force the Chinese to end their restrictions on British trade. Lord Palmerston, the British prime minister, justified these wars as the defense of free trade and downplayed the fact that the most lucrative British export to China was Indian opium. In 1845, Britain defeated Argentinean attempts to monopolize trade on the River Plate by blockading the river with Royal Navy gunboats.

British imperialists were also willing to use force simply to demonstrate that there were serious repercussions to wounding Britain's pride. In 1867, the British government sent an expedition of over 13,000 British and Indian soldiers into Ethiopia to punish King Theodorus for taking two minor British diplomats hostage. Costing over £8 million, the operation accomplished very little because British forces simply withdrew from the country after inflicting a decisive defeat upon the Ethiopians.

For the most part, however, British imperialists preferred to reap the benefits of informal influence rather than resort to expensive military operations to convince non-Western nations to surrender key aspects of

their sovereignty. Wherever possible, they preferred to work through existing political institutions. In South America, Britain abandoned plans to annex the estuary of the River Plate as unrealistically expensive and concentrated instead on using its influence to induce the Latin Americans to restructure their economies to favor British interests. British commercial concerns dominated South American markets, and British investors were the main creditors of the debt-ridden Argentine and Brazilian governments. In the latter half of the imperial century, they owned almost 50 percent of Argentina's fixed capital assets. These factors gave Britain such a considerable degree of influence in Latin America that formal imperial control was unnecessary.

Similarly, Britain's goal in its relations with the Ottoman and Chinese Empires was to achieve a maximum degree of influence without having to incur the cost and responsibility of direct administration. The Ottoman Empire was an important buffer state that prevented Russia, Britain's main central Asian rival, from threatening the routes to India. China, on the other hand, had little strategic value, but influential British industrialists and traders fantasized about the millions of potential customers waiting to buy British products if only the Chinese government could be persuaded to open its markets.

Therefore British imperialists sought to erode the sovereignty of these great non-European empires just enough to make their political and economic institutions more open. On the other hand, too much interference threatened to produce political disintegration, economic instability, and a potentially dangerous power vacuum that would force Britain to resort to formal annexation. British imperialists therefore hoped to strengthen these "rotten empires" by convincing them to adopt constitutions, free trade, industrial technology, and Western-style education. Few realized that in many ways their cure was worse than the disease. The loss of sovereignty inherent in informal influence, plus the imposition of Western culture and institutions, invariably exacerbated simmering social and political tensions in many non-Western societies.

Throughout the imperial century, the increasingly influential British evangelical movement disseminated Christianity and Western values, which also expanded Britain's informal influence. Many of Britain's Protestant denominations underwent a popular religious revival in the late eighteenth century. Believing that industrial and political change had produced a moral crisis in the country, they worked to transform Britain

into a sufficiently Christian nation. Their highest priority was universal spiritual salvation, which in practical terms meant spreading the knowledge of God and saving the emerging British working class from the evils of drink and sexual license. As has already been noted, they also joined with free trade reformers to condemn the evils of slavery.

Most Evangelicals were not opposed to imperialism and attributed Britain's power and influence overseas to the success of its divine mission. They felt a profound sense of obligation to share Christianity and British civilization with the "less fortunate" non-European peoples of the world. To a large degree, they equated difference with backwardness and considered cultures different from their own as representing an earlier, almost childlike stage of development. Although these views now seem unacceptably biased and judgmental, most Evangelicals believed they had a moral duty to protect and nurture "backward" societies. Many sought to prove that their African and Asian disciples were capable of civilization and founded schools and hospitals to share the benefits of European culture.

Evangelicals supported the efforts of Thomas Buxton, who emphasized the humane development of Africa as part of his campaign to abolish slavery. In the 1830s, Buxton was active in the Aborigines Protection Society and chaired a parliamentary committee which concluded that free labor brought the same benefits as free trade. Buxton placed most of the blame for slavery on African society and argued that the emancipation of slaves in British territories had to be accompanied by the total elimination of the institution of slavery in Africa. This goal could be accomplished only by providing Africans with a sufficiently lucrative alternative to trafficking in slaves. Buxton and his allies therefore popularized the concept of "legitimate commerce," whereby Africans would turn their energies to the production of the tropical commodities required by industrial Britain. Hence formal British rule would not be needed to coerce Africans into taking part in this enterprise because both sides would reap the mutual benefits of increased trade.

Most British evangelicals concurred with these sentiments, believing that commerce carried the message of salvation. They founded the London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, the British Bible Society, the Church of Scotland Mission, and other missionary organizations to spread their message of Christianity, industry, and commerce overseas. Although these missions were geared primarily to pro-

ducing Christian converts, they also spread British values and culture through the media of Western education and medical care. Missionaries often differed with the proponents of informal influence and free trade when they encountered cultural practices or political institutions that they deemed barbarous or uncivilized. In these cases they were quite willing to argue for British intervention and even formal annexation on humanitarian grounds. Some historians have accused the missionary societies of painting an overly lurid picture of non-Western "barbarism" to raise funds and attract followers in Britain. Their ability to mobilize widespread support among the newly literate British middle classes for overseas humanitarian causes certainly helped defeat Adderley's calls for withdrawal from West Africa and provided a cover of legitimacy for future British territorial annexations in Africa and Asia.

BRITAIN AND THE "NEW" IMPERIALISM

Although Britain's rapid acquisition of extensive territories in Africa and Asia in the late nineteenth century appeared to be a sudden and radical departure from its preference for informal influence, many historians have argued that the shift to formal imperial control was primarily Britain's response to increased economic and political competition from its European rivals. Its prosperity and economic strength was built on its industrial head start and isolation from the turbulent affairs of the continent. Yet these advantages came at a price. Without serious competition, the British had little incentive to modernize their industrial base and remained heavily dependent on simple manufactures, including textiles, iron, and hardware goods. British industry also did not take advantage of innovations in production. Britain's profitable exports of technology and capital helped its German and American rivals take the lead in the manufacture of chemicals, electrical goods, and steel. In 1870 Britain accounted for roughly one-third of the world's industrial output, but by 1914 this figure had fallen to only one-seventh.

Furthermore, as was the case with most industrial powers, the British economy's reliance on manufacturing made it vulnerable to cycles of high economic prosperity and depression. Generally speaking, Britain experienced an economic downturn every seven to ten years. Although most of these crises were followed by periods of profitable recovery, the

Great Depression of 1873 was so severe that many feared it would never end. The factors that produced the depression were complex, but its primary cause was the increased industrial capacity of Britain's American and European rivals. In other words, there simply were not enough consumers to purchase their manufactures. This surplus production drove down prices, diminished opportunities for profitable investment, and created widespread unemployment.

Many in Britain blamed the depression on the high protective tariffs that rival powers used to defend their developing industrial bases from British competition. In 1885 the Royal Commission on the Depression of Trade Industry concluded that foreigners had abused the principles of open commerce by using state support to secure an unfair advantage over British manufacturers and traders, who were still playing by the rules. Although the British economy had largely recovered by the beginning of the twentieth century, the depression of 1873 led some British imperialists to question the value of informal empire.

Britain's economic anxieties were compounded by its growing sense of military insecurity. After the Crimean War of 1855–1856, Russia's army of over half a million men appeared to threaten British India at a time when the Indian Mutiny of 1857 raised serious doubts about the reliability of the Indian army. In 1906 the commander in chief of British forces in India estimated that he would need 160,000 British troops to counter a Russian invasion, with an additional 300,000 to 400,000 reinforcements in the following year. Thus when France and Germany reemerged as major continental powers in the 1870s, British generals began to fear that they were stretched too thinly around the globe. To further complicate matters, Britain was already devoting over a third of its budget to the military and had the highest defense spending per capita of any European nation in the late nineteenth century.

Therefore Britain reorganized its armed forces in an effort to simultaneously reduce defense spending and counter its new imperial rivals. In 1870, Edward T. Cardwell, secretary of state for war, concentrated the regular British army in India and Britain by withdrawing troops from the colonies. Cardwell also ordered an overall force reduction of 25,000 men, so that in 1881 the British army numbered only 70,000 regular soldiers. By necessity, Britain relied on the Royal Navy and locally recruited colonial forces (most of whom were non-European) to defend its overseas empire.

These mounting economic and military concerns produced a profound crisis of confidence in British economic and political circles. Britain's imperialists understood that their empire depended on world peace and the unrestricted flow of commerce and investment. As tensions with their continental rivals mounted, they began to fear that they were entering into an era of imperial decline. Faced with the prospect of suffering the same fate as the Romans, British imperialists adopted a siege mentality focused on defending their global interests.

This change of thinking was particularly apparent in British politics. Apart from a commitment to protecting global free trade, British Liberals and Conservatives were largely unconcerned with imperial issues before the Great Depression of the 1870s. Both parties lamented the unfortunate circumstances that compelled Britain to annex new overseas territories and disagreed only over the timing and methods of these acquisitions. The Reform Bills of 1867 and 1884 broadened the British electorate and tempted politicians to use the empire to shape public opinion and win votes. Liberal prime minister William Gladstone framed imperial issues in high moral terms while Benjamin Disraeli, the leader of the Conservatives, used the empire to attract working-class voters by promoting national pride. His successor, the earl of Salisbury, was a strong advocate of defensive imperialism who worked actively to expand the empire. Joseph Chamberlain, Salisbury's colonial secretary from 1895 to 1902, believed that popular imperialism was the best cure for Britain's growing social and class tensions. In a sharp break with the official commitment to free trade, he argued for an imperial customs union that would use tariffs and preferences to deny Britain's rivals access to its colonial markets.

Although Chamberlain's proposal never came to pass, the Great Depression transformed many of Britain's manufacturing and commercial leaders into unabashed protectionists who hoped to solve the problem of overproduction by expanding their markets. Angered that their competitors had flaunted the "natural" laws of free trade, they pressed their leaders to intervene forcefully to protect existing markets and open new ones. These industrialists naturally focused on Britain's captive economy in India but also called for the acquisition of the hinterlands of Africa to fend off potential rivals. Some historians have argued that British manufacturers were too provincial to have much political influence in the gentlemanly circles of power in London, but their calls for the

defensive annexation of potentially valuable overseas territories struck a popular chord.

Over the course of the nineteenth century Britain's governing class of landed elites became increasingly allied with London financiers and investors. As the decline of British agriculture forced many aristocrats to seek new sources of wealth, London's financiers and merchant bankers became the logical partners for the gentry because they were products of the public school system and had sufficient leisure and wealth to support an aristocratic lifestyle. These gentlemanly capitalists directed a London-based international trading and financial system. They raised profitable loans for foreign governments, invested heavily in the infrastructure of developing economies, and provided credit to British merchants. Although returns on these foreign investments were not much higher than domestic levels, Britain's internal economy in the late nineteenth century simply could not provide enough profitable outlets for its excess capital. As a result, from 1865 to 1914, Britain's foreign investment amounted to about two-thirds of its approximately £5 billion in total savings.

Therefore British gentlemanly capitalists depended on an integrated global economy that allowed for the free flow of international commerce and investment. Unlike British industrialists, they did not see the need to extend Britain's formal empire to protect its markets. Territorial control was usually unimportant as long as their investments were safe. Nevertheless, they did not oppose the growth of the British Empire in the late nineteenth century. British investors profited from expansion, and even though less than 10 percent of Britain's total savings went to its non-self-governing colonies, the acquisition of new territory in Africa and Asia broadened the scope of the global British economic system.

The main difference between this "new" imperialism of formal empire and the midcentury empire of informal influence was that it took force to adapt African and Asian economies to the requirements of British commerce and investment. Although there were few opportunities for profitable investment in these underdeveloped economies, substantial profits could be made from the guaranteed loans and subsidies that the British government used to convince well-connected investors to risk their money in the new, less lucrative corners of the empire.

In addition to these economic factors, Britain's shift to formal empire in the late nineteenth century was abetted by shifting social attitudes

that made it easier to conquer and administer non-European populations. In imperial circles, the evangelical zeal of the missionary movement was drowned out by Social Darwinism and pseudoscientific racism. Although Charles Darwin did not apply his theory of natural selection and evolution to human societies, the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 had a profound influence on imperialist thought. British Social Darwinists concluded that "less fit" non-European peoples were incapable of coping with modernity and were unable to recognize the merits of Britain's superior culture because they were at a lower stage of evolutionary development. By this line of reasoning, "blackness" was equated with backwardness. The Social Darwinists developed new academic disciplines that used the pseudoscientific study of craniology and comparative anatomy to "prove" the inferiority of Africans and Asians.

On the basis of these specious arguments, British imperialists decided they had a paternalistic duty to rule non-European peoples because they were incapable of governing themselves. Although some missionaries remained committed to culturally transforming Africa and Asia along European lines, the public mood in Britain shifted after the 1857 Indian Mutiny. The 1865 revolt of ex-slaves in Jamaica confirmed the assumption that non-Europeans were incapable of civilization.

British imperialists were confident in their cultural superiority because the technical advances of the late-nineteenth-century industrial revolution had made it relatively easy for them to extend their influence to the tropical regions of the world. The discovery that microbes caused disease and that quinine, which was extracted from the bark of the South American cinchona tree, offered some protection from malaria and made tropical Africa far less threatening (and deadly) to Westerners. Whereas death rates among Europeans in their first year of residency in West Africa were 250 to 750 per thousand before 1840, by the end of the century, they had dropped to just fifty to one hundred per thousand. The steamship and the railway opened African and Asian hinterlands to conquest and commerce, and a new global network of undersea telegraph cables allowed London to exercise greater administrative control over the far corners of the empire. Before 1850, officials in India needed two to three months to send and receive messages via ship and train from Britain; by the 1870s it took only a day to exchange telegrams on the submarine cable system.

As impressive as these advances in medicine and communication

were, no innovation did more to shift the balance of power between Europe and the non-Western world than development of modern military technology. Armored British gunboats blockaded Chinese ports during the Opium Wars, forcing African merchants and rulers to tolerate open British trade on the Niger River. The repeating rifle, the rapid-fire maxim gun, and the explosive field artillery shell all made it relatively inexpensive for a handful of British soldiers to defeat a non-European enemy that greatly outnumbered them. Although this arms gap was less pronounced in Asia, it was devastating in Africa. In 1898, British forces at the Battle of Omdurman killed approximately 11,000 Sudanese in five hours at a cost of only twenty British and Egyptian soldiers.

The ease with which Britain won these appallingly lopsided battles seemed to vindicate the Social Darwinists. Yet it was all too easy to mistake military dominance for cultural superiority. British imperial enthusiasts failed to realize that although it may have been easy to defeat a poorly equipped non-European foe, it was quite another thing to rule them without resorting to a protracted and expensive period of military occupation.

If British imperialists were blind to this fact, it was because they acquired enormous tracts of territory in Africa and Asia with very little effort in the late nineteenth century. Britain was an active participant in the European partition of Africa in the 1880s. In addition to expanded coastal holdings in West Africa, Britain's share of the spoils included Egypt, the Sudan, and British Somaliland in Northeast Africa; Zanzibar, Uganda, and what came to be known as Kenya in East Africa; Nyasaland (Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in central Africa; and Swaziland, Basutoland (Lesotho), and Bechuanaland (Botswana) in southern Africa. It took a protracted war with the Afrikaners (1899–1902) to consolidate British rule over South Africa. In Asia, Britain strengthened the frontiers of India by occupying Burma and what is now Pakistan. It acquired sovereignty over most of the states in the Malay Peninsula by 1896 and occupied numerous islands in the South Pacific between 1874 and the end of the nineteenth century.

Although Britain did not acquire extensive Ottoman and Chinese territory during this period, its relations with these non-European empires changed dramatically under the “new” imperialism. Its occupation

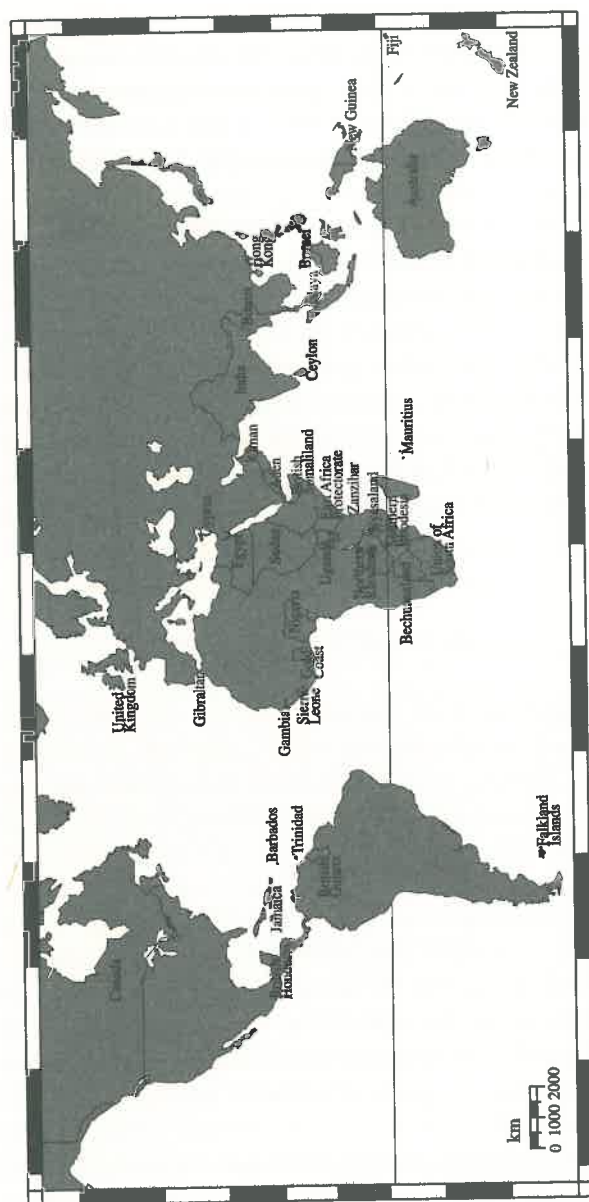
of Egypt in 1882 and incorporation of the Persian Gulf states into the British sphere of influence diminished the strategic importance of the Ottoman Empire as a buffer state against Russian expansionism. British financiers came to consider the Ottomans a bad risk, and politicians like Prime Minister Lord Salisbury began to openly discuss the need to abandon the older “dying nations.”

China, on the other hand, was still attractive to British merchants and investors at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet the potential dismemberment of the Chinese Empire by its European rivals forced Britain to abandon its earlier reliance on informal influence to protect its economic interests. The British government therefore took part in the European “scramble for concessions” in China in 1897 and pegged out the Yangtze River valley as a specifically British sphere of influence. In addition, it leased the port of Weihaiwei for twenty-five years and added the Kowloon New Territories to Hong Kong under a ninety-nine-year lease.

CONSOLIDATION OF EMPIRE

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the British Empire had essentially reached its full territorial extent. Although British imperialists often compared themselves to their Roman predecessors, the former organized their empire along substantially different lines. The British Empire was never a single administrative entity, and it lacked a uniform language, religion, and code of laws. The currency of both metropolitan Britain and the Australasian settlement colonies was gold-based sterling. India and British East Africa used silver rupees, whereas Malaya had silver dollars. Britain's colonies did not adopt a uniform sterling exchange standard until the eve of the First World War. In reality, the British Empire was a decentralized conglomeration of diverse territories and cultures whose only common point of reference was interaction with British imperial authority.

The effective administration of such a heterogeneous mix of peoples was no easy matter. There was never an “Imperial Department” of the British government; the Foreign Office, India Office, War Office, Colonial Office, Admiralty, and Board of Trade shared responsibility for running the empire. Nevertheless, most of the territories acquired under the



Map 2.2 The British Empire, c. 1914

“new” imperialism were administered by either the Foreign Office or the Colonial Office. Colonial matters were largely an afterthought to the Foreign Office, and the Colonial Office was surprisingly weak and understaffed during the imperial century. In 1907, its London office employed slightly more than one hundred people.

The colonies themselves were governed through a bewildering array of administrative systems, which were due more to local improvisation than any coherent philosophy of imperial rule. As has already been noted, the older settlement colonies enjoyed responsible or representative government. The British East India Company did not give way to an Indian council presided over by a member of the British cabinet until 1858. The other territories that had non-European majorities were usually designated as crown colonies under the autocratic authority of a royal governor who was the personal representative of the British monarch. Most of the colonies acquired during the partition of Africa became protectorates under the initial authority of the Foreign Office. Under this system, local rulers technically retained their sovereignty under the “protection” of the Crown, but most eventually saw their territories transformed into crown colonies when transferred to Colonial Office control.

In practice, many British possessions fell outside these relatively straightforward administrative categories. Egypt was run by a British consul general, who was theoretically an adviser to the Egyptian cabinet. The Sarawak protectorate in northern Borneo was ruled by a hereditary British raja, British Somaliland had a commissioner responsible to the Indian government, and Ascension Island was run by a captain in the Royal Navy. In terms of British administrative personnel, the Colonial Office’s entire field staff was slightly less than 6,000 strong, and all of India was governed by the civil service, which numbered just 3,000 men (including a handful of Indians) at the turn of the twentieth century.

Although Britain had its own strong domestic tradition of decentralized rule, its diverse imperial administrative policies were inspired largely by pragmatic adaptations to the strict financial limitations that its Treasury Department placed on imperial spending. Britain’s commitment to free trade precluded revenue-generating tariffs and shifted the financial burden of government to the British taxpayer. The cost of protecting a global empire forced Britain to spend more per capita on defense than any other European power. Thus the Treasury was absolutely

adamant that the colonies assume the cost of their own administration. It had absolute authority over foreign and domestic spending, and any colonial government needing financial assistance from the British government had to submit to the Treasury's ruthless insistence on economy and financial restraint.

These fiscal limitations had a profound influence on the character and scope of British colonial administration. Although Britain could, if it chose, defeat virtually any non-European foe on the battlefield, it could not afford the high cost of prolonged wars of attrition or widespread civil insurrection. For example, the colonial government of Sierra Leone had to spend £45,000 to suppress the Hut Tax Rebellion of 1898. On a larger scale, punitive operations in the East Africa Protectorate (Kenya) between 1895 and 1905 cost roughly one-third of the protectorate's total public spending for that period. Furthermore, the 70,000-man regular British army was not large enough to provide occupation forces for every territory in the empire with a non-European majority. Therefore even though Britain had a tremendous amount of coercive force at its disposal, it could not afford to provoke widespread discontent and unrest among its colonial subjects.

The image of the omnipotent colonial state with the power to arbitrarily reorder indigenous economic and social institutions is a myth. British imperialists could govern their non-European colonies only with the tacit assent of at least a small segment of the subject population. Britain lacked the resources and personnel to govern its global empire exclusively with European officials, and it recruited Africans and Asians as lower-level clerks, translators, artisans, police officers, and soldiers to help run the colonies.

British imperialists also endeavored to co-opt indigenous elites into the lower levels of the colonial bureaucracy. This system, known as indirect rule, was originally developed in India, as Britain governed much of the subcontinent through Indian princes and rajas. When colonial officials exported indirect rule to Africa, they sought to apply it to African kings and chiefs. Indirect rule lowered the cost of colonial administration by shrinking the British administrative staff and reducing the possibility that foreign rule might provoke unrest. As Nigerian governor Frederick Lugard put it, "It is one thing to excite an ignorant peasantry against an alien usurper, but quite another thing to challenge a native ruler."

Theoretically, these "native rulers" derived their legitimacy from

their "traditional" status in precolonial society; in reality British officials often promoted them to positions of authority based on their willingness to participate in the colonial system. Although these British clients often incurred the animosity of their fellow subjects, cooperation had its rewards. Colonial officials relied on these elites to interpret African and Asian society, and thus they had a substantial amount of influence in defining the customs and traditions that became the basis of colonial law. Therefore, subordinate indirect rulers in the British Empire enjoyed a measure of political power, economic security, and social status.

Similarly, in the Ottoman and Chinese Empires Britain relied on a class of translators, managers, commercial agents, and, in some cases, Christian converts to exert its informal influence. These intermediaries often grew wealthy through their partnership with British imperialists. In the eighteenth century, the British East India Company's Indian agents helped dismantle the Mughal Empire. In the nineteenth century, Britain did not have the same designs on the Chinese and Ottoman Empires, but in both cases local allies helped penetrate closed domestic markets by weakening the social consensus that had previously excluded foreigners. Although these activities made both empires dangerously unstable, the Chinese and the Ottomans escaped the fate of the Mughals. The westernized Chinese and Ottoman intermediary classes, wealthy as they were, were not powerful enough to sufficiently undermine the religious and cultural bonds that held their empires together.

These cases demonstrate clearly that the expansion of Britain's formal empire and informal influence into the tropical regions of Africa and Asia was determined by its ability to find partners among the local population. The remaining chapters of this book show that, for the most part, the loss of sovereignty inherent in British imperialism restructured indigenous political, economic, and social institutions in a manner that created considerable hardship for most of Britain's non-European subjects. Yet British imperialism also offered opportunity to at least a small segment of the colonial populace. Chinese commercial agents, Ottoman translators, Indian princes, or African clerks were certainly neither loyal British subjects nor calculating, self-interested traitors. Their participation in the imperial system was based on a rational response to the new realities of direct British rule or, in the case of the Ottoman and Chinese Empires, indirect British influence. Furthermore, the economic austerity of imperialism, which led Britain to seek allies among its African and

Asian subjects, tempered some of the worst abuses of the imperial system and created a medium for the diffusion of ideas between metropolitan Britain and its African and Asian periphery.

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