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Britain's imperial century, 1815–1914

Key dates

- 1839–42 First Opium War
- 1846 Repeal of the Corn Laws
- 1849 Repeal of the Navigation Acts
- 1856–60 Second Opium War
- 1869 Opening of the Suez Canal
- 1876 Queen Victoria becomes Empress of India
- 1882 British occupation of Egypt
- 1884–85 Berlin Conference
- 1902 Publication of J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism: a study*

The period from 1815 to 1914 has been seen as Britain's 'imperial century'. The last quarter of the nineteenth century in particular saw dramatic extensions of British territory in Africa and Southeast Asia. Indeed, it can be suggested that these years marked a decisive phase in the establishment of Britain's identity as an imperial power. Whether the costs of maintaining her inflated empire outweighed the benefits is a question which has exercised historians. Historical attention has also focused on areas which, while outside formal British control, were nevertheless under imperial influence. Some have even identified the existence of a vast 'informal empire'.

The 'imperialism of free trade'

Until the 1950s, it was generally assumed that the mid-nineteenth century witnessed an era of indifference to empire. This attitude stemmed from the rise of free trade and the decline of old mercantilism. In 1846, the Corn Laws, which had provided tariff protection to British agriculture, were repealed. Three years later, the Navigation Acts, which had underpinned the protectionist system, were also repealed. The practical effects of the introduction of free trade were the abolition of import duties, colonial preferences and shipping restrictions.

Anticipating the results of free trade, T. B. Macaulay declared in 1842: 'we might supply the whole world with manufactures and have almost a monopoly of the trade of the world'.¹ Such confidence in the strength of the British economy

led some contemporaries to doubt the value of empire, the eighteenth-century rationale for which had been the provision of guaranteed markets for British goods. The doubters became associated with the Manchester School of economists led by Richard Cobden. Cobden was a consistent critic of empire who in the aftermath of the Indian uprising of 1857 proclaimed that it would 'be a happy day when England has not an acre of territory in Continental Asia'.² While anti-imperial views did exist in the mid-Victorian age, their influence on British imperial policy is less certain.

In 1953, John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson published their controversial article, 'The imperialism of free trade'. As the title suggests, they sought to question the notion that free trade heralded an age of anti-imperialism. 'Far from being an era of "indifference"', they argue, 'the mid-Victorian years were the decisive stage in the history of British expansion overseas'.³ They justify their interpretation in a number of ways. First, they point to the extension of formal British territory during the free-trading mid-Victorian years: Oudh, Lower Burma and Kowloon in Asia; Basutoland and Griqualand in southern Africa; and Lagos and the neighbourhood of Sierra Leone in West Africa. Second, they indicate the growth of a huge 'informal empire' which while not directly ruled by Britain was nevertheless under her imperial sway. Indeed, they argue that regarding only territory under Britain's direct control as part of the empire is 'rather like judging the size and character of icebergs solely from the parts above the water-line'.⁴ In Gallagher and Robinson's analysis, the informal empire stemmed from the integration of new regions into Britain's expanding economy. 'Once entry had been forced into Latin America, China and the Balkans', they contend, 'the task was to encourage stable governments as good investment risks, just as in weaker or unsatisfactory states it was considered necessary to coerce them into more co-operative attitudes'.⁵ Britain's recognition in the 1820s of the independence of the emerging Latin American republics was designed to 'shatter the Spanish trade monopoly, and to gain informal supremacy'.⁶ Gallagher and Robinson conclude that the 'usual summing up of the policy of the free trade empire as "trade not rule" should read "trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary"'.⁷ Not surprisingly, the Robinson and Gallagher thesis has been subjected to close scrutiny. D. C. M. Platt has been one of their principal critics.

In Platt's view, Gallagher and Robinson have exaggerated the extent to which the British government was prepared to intervene in support of her economic interests. 'Fair and equal treatment', stresses Platt, 'not *favoured* treatment, was what British diplomacy aimed to achieve for British trade'.⁸ Platt has also cast doubt on the extent of Britain's economic penetration of the 'informal empire' in the mid-Victorian years. In his analysis, the economic potential of areas such as China and Latin America was restricted by local resistance to British manufactures and the lack of a return trade in locally produced commodities.⁹ An evaluation of the relative merits of the arguments of Gallagher and Robinson, on the one hand, and Platt, on the other, is necessary to determine the viability of the term 'informal empire'.

As regards the preparedness of the British government to intervene in support of economic interests, it can be suggested that Platt overstates his case. While it is true that Britain rarely sought to secure exclusive economic privileges, Platt underestimates the extent of British interference in the internal affairs of those states identified by Gallagher and Robinson as being within the informal empire.

No matter how earnestly British statesmen might espouse non-intervention, a combination of poor communications, vague instructions and local instability provided British representatives with ample scope to act in defiance of official policy. In Brazil, Argentina and Central America in the 1840s, British diplomats, consuls, and naval officers became embroiled in local politics.¹⁰ In China, moreover, Britons also became heavily involved in internal affairs. In 1854, for instance, a British-dominated customs agency was established, Sir Robert Hart acting as inspector-general of Chinese customs from 1863 to 1906. Britain also engaged in forceful interventions, the so-called Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1856–60, in order to open China to greater trade. As a consequence of these wars, a number of treaty ports, through which unhindered trade could be conducted, were established. In the aftermath of the First Opium War, moreover, Hong Kong became a British colony. With a view to making China more responsive to Western demands, the British induced the Chinese imperial authorities to set up a modern foreign office, or *Tsungli-yamen*, in 1861. While Platt's characterisation of Britain as a non-interventionist power in the mid-Victorian years is open to question, it is equally uncertain whether the scale of British trade justifies Gallagher and Robinson's use of the term empire.

Gallagher and Robinson define imperialism as a 'political function' of the process of 'integrating new regions into the expanding economy'.¹¹ However, the process of Britain's economic integration with those areas of the world identified as being part of the informal empire was patchy and frequently attended by disappointment. In 1817, Lord Brougham told the House of Commons that, 'no field of enterprise was so magnificent in promise . . . as the vast continent of South America'.¹² These early expectations were soon frustrated. After an initial boom following independence, Latin America's relative importance to the British economy began to ebb, the region's share of Britain's export trade declining from 12.6 per cent in the mid-1820s to 8.8 per cent by the mid-1850s. A similar pattern can be discerned in relation to China which, despite the opening of the treaty ports in the mid-century, was becoming less important to British trade.¹³ Explaining the contrast between expectations and reality, Sir Robert Hart noted: 'The Chinese have the best food in the world, rice; the best drink, tea; and best clothing, cotton, silk and fur. Possessing these staples, and their innumerable native adjuncts, they do not need to buy a penny's-worth elsewhere'.¹⁴ Not only were the returns discouraging, but also British merchants, far from displacing their local rivals, were frequently forced to rely on them for access to domestic markets. Such a demonstrable lack of British economic dominance can be used to cast doubt on the existence of an informal empire in the mid-Victorian years. The concept of informal empire can be applied more successfully to the years leading up to the First World War.

'If Gallagher and Robinson overestimated the extent of Britain's informal empire in the mid-Victorian era', argue P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, 'Platt has underestimated its size during the Edwardian period.'¹⁵ Focusing on Latin America, Cain and Hopkins demonstrate that in contrast with the erosion of this region as a market for British manufactures from the late nineteenth century, its importance as a recipient of British capital was increasing. British holdings in Latin America grew from a modest £81 million in 1865 to reach the remarkable figure of £1,180, or 25 per cent of Britain's overseas investment, by 1913. Argentina alone received 41 per cent of British investment in Latin America. Likening this country to Canada and Australia, Cain and Hopkins have described it as an 'honorary dominion'. More generally, Cain and Hopkins contend that it was 'in the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially after 1870, that Britain's expanding financial power created a world-wide "invisible empire" which compensated for her dwindling economic influence in the United States and Europe'.¹⁶ In attempting to establish a link between the export of capital and British overseas expansion, Cain and Hopkins have drawn on the work of early-twentieth-century writers.

Economics and empire

In his 1902 publication, *Imperialism: a study*, the economist J. A. Hobson propounded the 'surplus capital' theory of expansion. When domestic industry produced more capital than could be profitably reinvested in the domestic economy, he argued, financiers sought overseas outlets for their money. Such surplus capital derived from a maldistribution of wealth which left too much money in too few hands. Having invested in unsettled parts of the world, financiers pressed for British intervention to protect their investments. Summarising his thesis, Hobson declared: 'It is not too much to say that the modern foreign policy of Great Britain is primarily a struggle for profitable markets of investment' (see document 7.6). Hobson's ideas were later taken up by the Russian communist leader V. I. Lenin, in an attempt to demonstrate that imperialism was not only a natural corollary of capitalism, but also a sign of its ultimate and inevitable downfall. The incontestable fact that very little of Britain's total investments were placed in the new African and Asian territories acquired at the end of the nineteenth century appeared to discredit Hobson's and Lenin's arguments.¹⁷ More recently, however, Hobson's and Lenin's assertion that imperialism derived from metropolitan economic forces has been revived, though in a modified form, by Cain and Hopkins.

'Explanations of imperialism ought to begin with a close study of economic structure and change in Britain', argue Cain and Hopkins.¹⁸ In the past, however, they suggest that 'non-industrial forms of capitalist enterprise, particularly those in finance and commercial services, have not received the historical recognition they deserve'.¹⁹ Despite the slow growth of manufacturing output after the mid-nineteenth century, the financial and service sectors of the economy experienced rapid expansion. In Cain and Hopkins' analysis, the link between Britain's

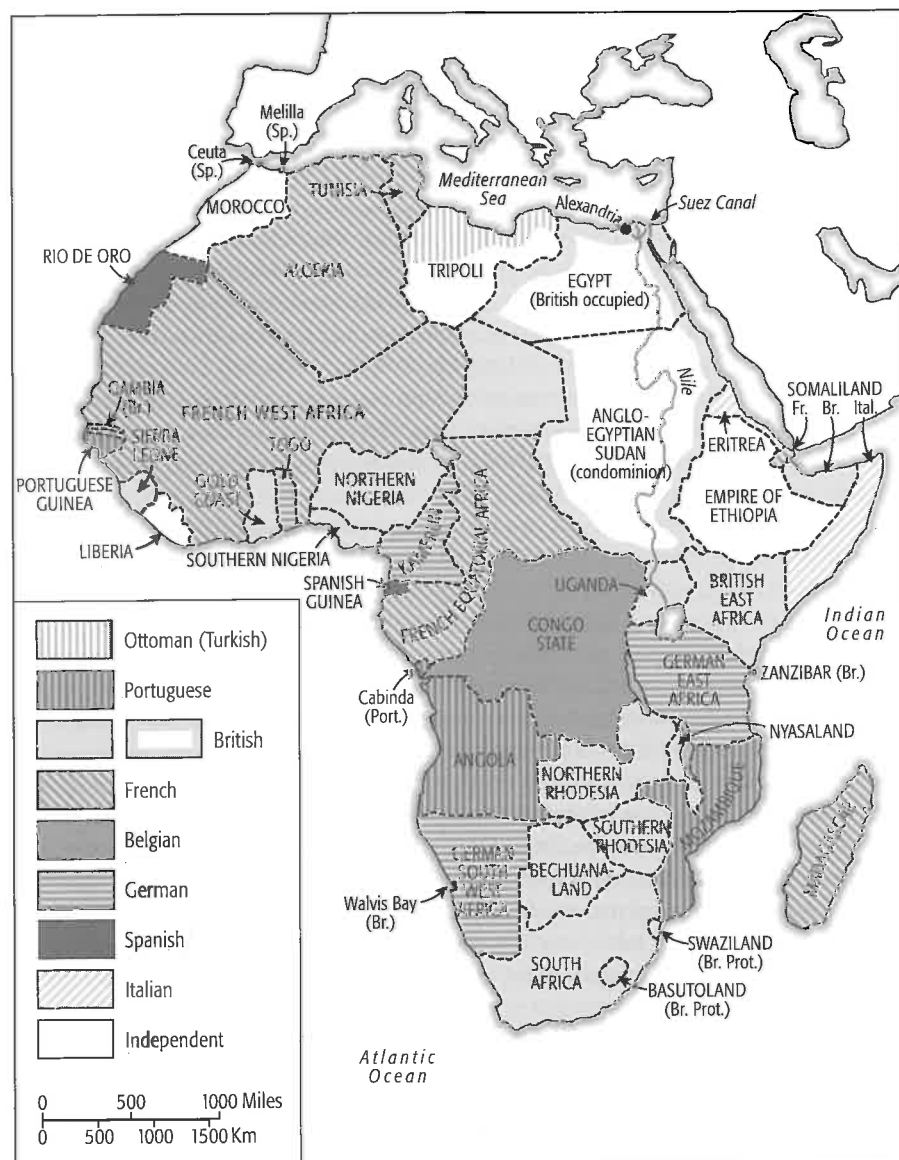
expanding financial interests and empire was provided by 'gentlemanly capitalists', landowners and financiers from the south of England who possessed the same social background and perceptions of national interest as the aristocratic governing class. Northern manufacturers, by contrast, were 'largely outside the circle of gentlemanly culture and did not "speak the same language" as the aristo-financial élite'.²⁰

Applying their interpretation to the European partition of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, Cain and Hopkins suggest that Britain's participation was dictated by a determination to protect her economic interests. In consequence, they focus on those areas of the continent, such as Egypt and southern Africa, where Britain's economic stake, especially her investments, was greatest. Referring to Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882, for instance, Cain and Hopkins maintain that, 'British policy was assertive not because policy-makers were in the pockets of the bond-holders, but because they recognised the need to defend Britain's substantial economic interests'.²¹ Cain and Hopkins' ideas, however, are open to a number of criticisms.²²

In concentrating on finance, it can be suggested that Cain and Hopkins have focused on the 'gentlemanly capitalists' to the exclusion of other important influences on the course of British imperialism. Andrew Porter, for example, has demonstrated that strong regional centres such as West and Central Scotland and Lancashire developed extensive overseas connections. David Cannadine, furthermore, has stressed that Cain and Hopkins have drawn an artificial distinction between the industrial and financial-service sectors of the British economy, which were often complementary, not competing. Cannadine also emphasises that late-nineteenth-century British statesmen were not indifferent to the needs of industry, and that the financial service-sector did not speak with a single voice. In a similar vein, D. K. Fieldhouse has questioned the homogeneity of the 'gentlemanly capitalist' class. In addition, he suggests that Cain and Hopkins have placed too much emphasis on the metropolitan centre at the expense of the imperial periphery. An emphasis on events on the imperial periphery is central to Gallagher and Robinson's explanation for the European partition of Africa. (See Map 4.)

'Scanning Europe for the causes', argue Gallagher and Robinson, 'the theorists of imperialism have been looking for the answers in the wrong places. The crucial changes that set all working took place in Africa itself'.²³ These changes centred on a series of local crises, the most important of which was the outbreak in 1881 of an army revolt led by Arabi Pasha against the ruler, or khedive, of Egypt. With the breakdown of indigenous authority, Britain was forced to intervene to protect her vital strategic interests in Egypt, more particularly the Suez Canal.

Completed in 1869, the Canal provided Britain with an alternative route to India and the East which was much quicker than either the Cape passage or overland routes through the Middle East. In 1875, the prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, had acquired for Britain 177,000 out of 400,000 Suez Canal Company shares. By 1882, not only was more than 80% of Suez traffic British, but also



Map 4. The partition of Africa by 1902

13% of Britain's entire trade was passing through the Canal. In Gallagher and Robinson's analysis, the threat to the Canal posed by Arabi's revolt forced Britain to act. Summarising Britain's approach to the problem, they insist that: 'According to the dogmas of strategy, if Suez was in jeopardy, it must be protected at any cost.'²⁴ Britain's occupation of Egypt, however, had repercussions across Africa. 'From start to finish', contend Gallagher and Robinson, 'the partition of tropical Africa was driven by the persistent crisis in Egypt. When the

British entered Egypt on their own, the Scramble began; and as long as they stayed in Cairo, it continued until there was no more of Africa left to divide.'²⁵ In their opinion, the French, offended at Britain's unilateral action, embarked upon an expansionist policy in West Africa in order to provide both compensation and a means of forcing the British to leave Egypt. Prime minister Salisbury's decision in 1889 that Britain would remain in Egypt for the foreseeable future, argue Gallagher and Robinson, led to the second phase of the European partition of Africa in which Britain strove to keep the Nile valley and much of eastern Africa under her control in order strategically to protect Egypt. However, a number of criticisms can be levelled at this Egyptocentric thesis.

G. N. Sanderson has demonstrated that the partition of territory predated Britain's occupation of Egypt.²⁶ Prompted by concerns about the extension of British supremacy, the French in the 1870s began expanding their imperial presence, especially in West Africa, a development facilitated by the erosion of Britain's traditional naval dominance. Gallagher and Robinson's argument has also been weakened by A. G. Hopkins' contention that the French, far from being alienated by Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882, congratulated the British for taking action that appeared to protect the lives and property of Frenchmen.²⁷ Moreover, it can be suggested that the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, rather than Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882, began a new aggressive phase in the partition of Africa. Indeed, by establishing the doctrine of 'effective occupation', the Conference forced countries wishing to have a stake in Africa to establish a formal presence, rather than relying on claims to informal supremacy. The fact that other areas of the world, most notably Southeast Asia, were also partitioned at this time,²⁸ suggests that wider international forces were at work in the late nineteenth century than simply those connected with Britain's occupation of Egypt. Whether the British Empire in this period was a source of strength or weakness to Britain is a controversial question.

Despite the devotion to empire expressed by late-nineteenth-century politicians, historians have questioned the value of Britain's imperial presence. At the forefront of this reassessment have been Lance E. Davis and Robert A. Huttenback. As regards the financial benefits of empire, they seek to demonstrate that in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century British investment outside the empire yielded higher rates of return than investment in the empire. '[F]or the general investor in the years after 1880', they suggest, 'the Empire was probably a snare and a delusion – a flame not worth the candle.'²⁹ In addition, they argue that the empire required subsidies, the most important of which were in the field of defence, necessitating the maintenance of artificially high levels of taxation in Britain. On the one hand, if the empire had made a fair contribution to imperial defence, taxes in Britain might have been reduced by 20 per cent. On the other, if Britain had relinquished empire and spent as much on defence as France and Germany, taxes would have fallen by some 12 per cent. Concluding their study, Davis and Huttenback state: 'The British as a whole did not benefit economically from the Empire.'³⁰ Their interpretation, however, can be criticised in a number of ways.³¹

Avner Offer suggests that Davis and Huttenback have overestimated British defence expenditure and underestimated that of other comparable powers, especially France. Offer's figures indicate that far from spending more than France, Britain spent about a third less on defence. Focusing on India, Offer



A cartoon from *Punch* drawn by Sir John Tenniel in 1876 depicting the prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, crowning Queen Victoria Empress of India. Evaluate the representation of Disraeli and Disraeli in this cartoon.

shows that by paying for British and Indian troops serving overseas, India actually subsidised Britain. Andrew Porter, moreover, has suggested that much of the defence spending cited by Davis and Huttenback, far from representing an imperial subsidy, reflected Britain's position as a world-wide trading nation. Porter also accuses Davis and Huttenback of neglecting the empire's value as a supplier of low-cost commodities (foodstuffs and raw materials) to Britain. A. G. Hopkins, furthermore, criticises Davis and Huttenback's concentration on formal, constitutional empire, at the expense of informal empire. Focusing on Davis and Huttenback's historical methods, Hopkins also questions whether the consequences of imperialism can ever be assessed by accounting procedures alone. Indeed, Davis and Huttenback disregard other, non-quantifiable, benefits of empire such as international prestige, feelings of security, and the spread of British 'civilisation' and culture. On this final question, it can be suggested that the cultural exchange was a reciprocal process.

Imperial Britain

From the late nineteenth century, the growth of an 'imperial nationalism' can be identified. The new-found reverence for empire coalesced around monarchism, militarism and notions of racial superiority, or Social Darwinism. Between the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861 and her re-emergence into public life 15 years later, Queen Victoria was a remote, even unpopular figure. Her elevation in 1876 to the position of Empress of India marked her transformation in the public mind from 'petulant widow to imperial matriarch'.³² Indeed, the monarchy became increasingly associated with imperial imagery. This reached a remarkable climax when representatives from throughout the empire came to London in 1897 to celebrate Victoria's diamond jubilee. The second half of the nineteenth century also witnessed a growth in popularity of the armed forces, with military figures such as General Gordon, killed at Khartoum in 1885, raised to the status of national heroes. The depiction of such figures as representatives of a master people fuelled notions of racial superiority.

Imperial nationalism was reflected in juvenile literature, advertising, theatre, youth organisations and the educational system. The new enthusiasm for empire, moreover, was not confined to any one class in society. Such diverse institutions as public schools and working men's clubs demonstrated patriotic pride in empire. To what extent has imperial nationalism survived to the present day?

Document case study

7.1 Memorandum by William Gladstone (colonial secretary), 18 June 1846

The multiplication of colonies at the other end of the world must at all times be a matter of serious consideration; but especially at a time when we have already land almost infinite to defend that we cannot occupy, people to reduce to order whom we have not been able to keep in friendly relations, and questions in so many departments of government to manage, the discussion of which has been found embarrassing at home, and which appear to be thought fully equal in the demands they make to any energies that Executive Government is able to apply to them.

Source: Public Record Office, London, CO 144/1

7.2 Letter from Lord Clarendon (foreign secretary) to Sir Thomas Wade (Her Majesty's minister in Peking), 7 April 1870

British interests in China are strictly commercial, or, at all events, only so far political as they may be for the protection of commerce and of British subjects in their lawful pursuits. The British Government have neither the desire nor the intention to interfere with the internal administration of China, neither do they wish to employ any other action than that of friendly representation upon the Imperial Government for the defence of British subjects or for the redress of wrongs done to them.

Source: Nathan A. Pelcovits, *Old China hands and the Foreign Office*, New York, 1948, p. 85

7.3 Memorandum by Lord Palmerston (foreign secretary), 29 September 1850

These half civilised governments, such as those of China, Portugal, Spanish America, require a dressing every eight or ten years to keep them in order. Their minds are too shallow to receive an impression that will last longer than some such period, and warning is of little use. They care little for words and they must not only see the stick but actually feel it on their shoulders before they yield to that only argument which to them brings conviction, the *argumentum Baculinum* [argument of the stick].

Source: Ronald Hyam, *Britain's imperial century, 1815–1914*, 2nd edn, Basingstoke, 1993, p. 119

7.4 Speech by Sir Charles Dilke (under-secretary of state for foreign affairs), 25 July 1882

Egypt forms our highway to India and to the East generally . . . As regards the Suez Canal, England has a double interest; it has a predominant commercial interest, because 82 per cent of the trade passing through the Canal is British trade, and it has a predominant political interest caused by the fact that the Canal is the principal highway to India, Ceylon, the Straits and British Burmah, where 250,000,000 live under our rule; and also to China where we have vast interests and 84 per cent of the external trade of that still more enormous Empire. It is also one of the roads to our Colonial Empire in Australia and New Zealand.

7.5 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 February 1884

In times past . . . we did what we pleased, where we pleased, and as we pleased. The whole of heathendom, to use a comprehensive term, was our inheritance, and the salt sea our peculiar possession. All that has changed. Europe has overflowed into Africa, Asia, America, Australasia and the Pacific. At every turn we are confronted with gunboats, the sea lairs, or the colonies of jealous and eager rivals . . . The world is filling up around us . . . Europe, no longer distracted by intestine [domestic] feuds, throws off ever increasing swarms to settle in other continents, and whereas, since Trafalgar, the Englishman has never found himself confronted by any other opponent but the savage with his spear, or the pirate in his prah, we now find every ocean highway furrowed by European ironclads, while over many a colonial frontier frowns the cannon of Continental rivals.

Source: Bernard Porter, *The lion's share: a short history of British imperialism*, 3rd edn, London, 1996, p. 117

7.6 Hobson and surplus capital

It is not too much to say that the modern foreign policy of Great Britain has been primarily a struggle for profitable markets of investment. To a larger extent every year Great Britain has been becoming a nation living upon tribute from abroad, and the classes who enjoy this tribute have had an ever-increasing incentive to employ the public policy, the public purse, and the public force to extend the field of their private investments, and to safeguard and improve their existing investments. This is, perhaps, the most important fact in modern politics, and the obscurity in which it is wrapped has constituted the gravest danger to our State . . .

It is this economic condition of affairs that forms the taproot of Imperialism. If the consuming public in this country raised its standard of consumption to keep pace with every rise of productive powers, there could be no excess of goods or capital clamorous to use Imperialism in order to find markets . . .

. . . It is not industrial progress that demands the opening up of new markets and areas of investment, but mal-distribution of consuming power which prevents the absorption of commodities and capital within the country.

Source: J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: a study*, 3rd edn, London, 1938, pp. 53–54, 81, 85

Document case-study questions

- 1 What does 7.1 tell us about British attitudes towards imperial expansion?
- 2 How convincing do you find the claims made by Lord Clarendon in 7.2?
- 3 Compare the assessment of Britain's freedom of action in 7.3 with that of 7.5.
- 4 In what ways could 7.4 be used to support the strategic interpretation of Britain's occupation of Egypt?
- 5 How persuasive do you find J. A. Hobson's explanation for imperialism in 7.6?

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