



BRITAIN'S IMPERIAL CENTURY, 1815–1914

A STUDY OF EMPIRE AND EXPANSION

Third Edition

RONALD HYAM

CAMBRIDGE IMPERIAL AND POST-COLONIAL STUDIES



Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series

This informative series covers the broad span of modern imperial history while also exploring the recent developments in former colonial states where residues of empire can still be found. The books provide in-depth examinations of empires as competing and complementary power structures encouraging the reader to reconsider their understanding of international and world history during recent centuries.

Titles include:

Tony Ballantyne

ORIENTALISM AND RACE

Aryanism in the British Empire

Anthony J. Barker

SLAVERY AND ANTI-SLAVERY IN MAURITIUS, 1810-33

The Conflict between Economic Expansion and Humanitarian Reform
under British Rule

Roy Bridges (*editor*)

IMPERIALISM, DECOLONIZATION AND AFRICA

Studies Presented to John Hargreaves

T. J. Cribb (*editor*)

IMAGINED COMMONWEALTH

Cambridge Essays on Commonwealth and International Literature in English

Ronald Hyam

BRITAIN'S IMPERIAL CENTURY, 1815-1914

A Study of Empire and Expansion

Third Edition

Robin Jeffrey

POLITICS, WOMEN AND WELL-BEING

How Kerala became a 'Model'

Gerold Krozewski

MONEY AND THE END OF EMPIRE

British International Economic Policy and the Colonies, 1947-58

Ged Martin

BRITAIN AND THE ORIGINS OF CANADIAN CONFEDERATION, 1837-67

W. David McIntyre

BACKGROUND TO THE ANZUS PACT

Policy-Makers, Strategy and Diplomacy, 1945-55

Francine McKenzie

REDEFINING THE BONDS OF COMMONWEALTH 1939-1948

The Politics of Preference

John Singleton and Paul Robertson
ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN BRITAIN AND AUSTRALASIA 1945–1970

Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series
Series Standing Order ISBN 0-333-91908-4
(outside North America only)

You can receive future titles in this series as they are published by placing a standing order. Please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address, the title of the series and the ISBN quoted above.

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd, Houndmills, Basingstoke,
Hampshire RG21 6XS, England

Britain's Imperial Century, 1815–1914

A Study of Empire and Expansion

Ronald Hyam

Fellow

Magdalene College, Cambridge

Third Edition



© Ronald Hyam 1976, 1993, 2002

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First edition published by B.T. Batsford Ltd 1976

Second edition 1993

Third edition 2002

Published by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-0-333-99311-8

ISBN 978-1-4039-1842-0 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-4039-1842-0

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hyam, Ronald.

Britain's imperial century, 1815–1914 : a study of empire and expansion / Ronald Hyam. — 3rd ed.

p. cm. — (Cambridge imperial and post-colonial studies series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-333-99311-X

1. Great Britain—Colonies—History. I. Title. II. Series.

JV1017 .H92 2002

325'.341'09034—dc21

2002072332

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham and Eastbourne

IN PIAM MEMORIAM

**F.H. Hinsley, Kt, OBE, FBA
(1918–1998)**

**R.E. Robinson, DFC, CBE
(1920–1999)**

*Blind, fooled, and staggering from her throne, I saw her fall,
Clutching at the gaud of Empire;
And wondering, round her, sons and daughter-nations stood –
What madness had possessed her;
But when they lifted her, the heart was dead,
Withered within the body, and all the veins
Were choked with yellow dirt.*

Edward Carpenter,
Towards Democracy Pt IV, 'Empire' [1902]

*Wider still and wider,
Shall thy bounds be set;
God who made thee mighty,
Make thee mightier yet.*

A.C. Benson, *Land of Hope and Glory* (1902)

Contents

<i>List of Maps and Tables</i>	ix
<i>Preface to the Third Edition</i>	xi
<i>Introduction to the Third Edition</i>	xv
1 <i>The Foundations of Power, 1815–70</i>	1
The project of an empire	1
British hegemony and its residual rivals	8
Sea power and gunboat diplomacy	15
Economic enterprise: exports, imports and free trade	21
The importance of the Indian raj	32
The white colonies and the problems of imperial organisation	39
Britain and the American challenge:	52
Latin America	56
The extension of the Union	61
The future of Canada	68
2 <i>The Motives and Methods of Expansion, 1815–65</i>	74
Racial attitudes	74
Anti-slavery and the humanitarian impulse	77
Economic and ideological motives for expansion	86
The Protestant missionary movement	91
Palmerston and the grand design	97
The theory and practice of global influence	105
Informal empire in China	123
3 <i>The Decline of British Pre-eminence, 1855–1900</i>	134
The Indian Mutiny-Rebellion	134
A decade of crisis for the grand design, 1855–65	145
The hardening of racial attitudes	155
The Irish protest	166
The occupation of Egypt	174
The response to emergent nationalism in India and Egypt	183
The growth of pessimism	189
Economic retardation	197

4	<i>The Search for Stability, 1880–1914</i>	203
	Partitioning the world	203
	The partition of Africa	213
	The myth of a ‘special relationship’ with the United States	231
	The federal panacea	235
	The origins of the South African War, 1899	240
	Chamberlain, the West Indies and tariff reform	247
	Defence and diplomacy	257
	The contribution of the Liberal government, 1905–14	266
	Schooling and scouting	272
5	<i>The Dynamics of Empire and Expansion</i>	280
	Surplus energy and the proconsular phenomenon	280
	The engine of expansion: a model	285
	Props of empire-building: sex, sport and secret societies	290
	White skins, white masks: techniques of control	301
	The construction of the colonial state and the beginnings of globalisation	310
	Global context: the empire in comparative perspective	317
	1914 and the writing on the wall	332
	<i>References</i>	338
	<i>Select Bibliography</i>	358
	<i>Index</i>	364

List of Maps and Tables

MAPS

Australia and New Zealand	40
South Africa: land settlement	46
North American expansion	62
Non-European labour migration	79
The Chinese empire	125
The Indian empire	135
The Middle East and Indian communications	176
South-East Asia	206
The partition of Africa in 1895	215
Some African states and societies	220
Main prostitution networks, c. 1914	293
Russian expansion in Central Asia	318

DIAGRAM

New portfolio British capital investments (1865–1914)	26
---	----

TABLES

Export of cotton manufactured piece-goods (1815–75)	22
Destination of emigrants from Britain (1843–1913)	24
Selected British imports (1821–51)	27
British imports of raw wool (1800–86)	29
Canadian population growth (1841–61)	42
British imports of ivory (1827–1900)	218

Preface to the Third Edition

Venturing into the wash-room of the Seamen's Club in Shanghai during the late 1960s, a recently-graduated student of mine discovered that the portraits on the wall were of Mao Tse-tung, but all the lavatorial fittings were stamped 'Doulton's of London'. It was as neat a demonstration as you could hope to find of the reality of Britain's 'informal empire'. The aim of *Britain's Imperial Century* is to provide some account of the worldwide pattern of British activity in the nineteenth century, embracing its expansive spirit as well as its formal territorial empire. Thus China and Latin America find a place in it as well as India, the white dominions and the African colonies.

One of the features of the book is that it steers clear of contentious 'isms'. It is written without resort to those vague and emotive words 'imperialism', 'colonialism' and 'capitalism', though unavoidably they may appear in quotations or historiographical references. Even 'racism' is avoided, though there is a great deal about 'racial attitudes'. I have never found any difficulty in this self-denying ordinance, but I have as yet been singularly unsuccessful in persuading other historians also to implement the admirable injunctions of W.K. Hancock and T.S. Ashton. Perhaps it would simply remove too many controversies from the academic arena. As an alternative to 'imperialism' I invented the neutral and uncontaminated term 'cosmoplastic' to describe the 'world-moulding' process inherent in empire-and-expansion, both as intention and effect. Perhaps this graphic term will now be accepted as a useful adjunct to the fashionable 'globalisation'.

The first edition was published over 25 years ago. In those days one was supposed to write about the empire with a certain traditional seriousness. Even if one's colleagues did not necessarily expect a personal commitment to the imperial idea, everyone else invariably assumed an imperial historian must be a true-blue flag-waving 'Land of Hope and Glory' polemicist. My feelings about empire were much more ambivalent than that, and I was determined to widen the conventional agenda by including a number of themes which had never before appeared in textbooks about the empire. This crossing of boundaries was

meant to be subversive. One of my senior colleagues warned me that some of my new themes might be adjudged frivolous. He persuaded me not to use the word 'sex' overtly in a chapter heading ('surplus emotional energy' was adopted instead), and advised me to deflect criticisms of flippancy with a quotation from Kipling:

I have written the tale of our life
 For a sheltered people's mirth,
 In jesting guise – but ye are wise,
 And ye know what the jest is worth.

It is a measure of how much the writing of history has changed in the last quarter-century that such pussy-footing and defensive caution now looks archaic. I may have failed over the 'isms' of empire, but my once-daring exploration of themes such as sport, masculinity, sexuality, medical praxis (British male circumcision as a defining characteristic of the imperial administrative elite), education and the influence of public schools, scouting, gentlemen's clubs and freemasonry, have all been followed up in countless books, articles and research dissertations. Sex is now so much an accepted part of legitimate explanation that one reviewer of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* complained that the first two volumes (1998) contained too little about sexual activity in the North American colonies.* Any way, *Britain's Imperial Century* pioneered a more broadly-based cultural approach, and did so two years before the publication of Edward Said's notorious *Orientalism* (1978). I could, I suppose, claim therefore to be, all unknowing, and without benefit of modish jargon, a cultural postmodernist before the term was invented.

The revised second edition (1993) enabled me radically to restructure the book and add material on Palmerston's system, and on missionary activity (the expansion of Christianity), as well as the ecological background to some major developments (for example to the partition of Africa). The book was considerably shortened by the reduction of regional detail, and there were pluses and minuses about that; the first edition was not

* 'Bluntly put, who was fucking with whom?': Richard Gott, 'We must not forget the slavery and the killings', *Literary Review*, June 1998.

rendered redundant.* But the revision enabled me to refine and sharpen my ideas about the dynamics of expansion and empire into a more clearly defined model for analysing the relationship between metropolis and periphery, and between economic and strategic motivations, the private and public realms.

As a result, I have not felt the need to make any further changes to the text for the third edition (although the final section, '1914 and the writing on the wall' has been slightly recast). I have however added an Introduction which highlights the emphasis I would now wish to give to 'the primacy of geopolitics'. I have also added two more new sections, one on 'the colonial state', its character and impact, the other suggesting some comparisons between the British empire and its nineteenth-century rivals. The purpose of the latter is to test the validity of my 'dynamics' model, and to give support to the importance I now attach to the geopolitical study of empire. Both these new sections help to bring the book into line with two of the more worthwhile trends in writing about the subject.

I remain especially grateful to Joan Pocock who drew the maps which so enhance the volume – except the map on p. 293 which I did myself. I am also hugely in the debt of two successive editors of this series, Anthony Low and Tony Hopkins, whose faith in the book has prolonged its life. Beyond that, in the course of more than 40 years engagement with the subject I have incurred innumerable obligations: to my teachers and mentors, to my pupils, to colleagues, to visiting scholars and overseas correspondents, and to those friends who have provided encouragement, hospitality and diversion. Much kindness has been shown to me in various parts of the world, from Mumbai (Bombay) to Mbabane (Swaziland), as well as at Magdalene College. It would be invidious to single out individuals. I thank them all, most warmly. However, for the first time, I add a dedication: to two of the most remarkable men I have ever known, without whom this book could never have been brought into existence.

R.H.

Magdalene College, Cambridge

* For a helpful but astringent analysis of the changes, see P. Burroughs, review, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22 (1994), 574–8.

Introduction to the Third Edition

‘Let it be agreed then that the theory of “economic imperialism” is dead, and that there is no further point in trying to discuss British imperial history within the framework it has created. Whatever the motives for British empire and expansion in the nineteenth century, they cannot in the main be ascribed to an “economic taproot” of powerful interests seeking to find markets for “their surplus goods and their surplus capital”.’ These words, which I wrote in 1975, provide the theoretical starting-point for the analysis in *Britain’s Imperial Century*.¹ It does not align itself with any accounts which privilege economic explanations of imperial hegemony, least of all those centred on capitalist interest-groups.² Nor does it suppose that the essential impetus can be located solely in one place, whether metropolis or overseas periphery, but argues that it must be sought in the dynamic interaction between the ‘chaotic pluralism’ of private interests and the pragmatic decision-making of prestige-driven high politics.³ It is important to understand how governments think, and how they try to distance themselves from pressure groups of all kinds. Thus ‘capitalism’, as F.H. Hinsley explained:

represented not the motivation of the search for power but [was] part of the circumstances and conditions that shaped the objectives which the search for power, itself a more basic thing, embraced. In the nineteenth century . . . the expansion of territory and . . . the seizure of colonies [was] a natural, not to say unavoidable, objective of the basic urge to power. Imperialism in the nineteenth century was not the necessary outcome of capitalism but the natural expression of power in the conditions of the time.⁴

In *Britain’s Imperial Century* the government is seen as acting under the imperatives of its own understanding of the use of power – ‘itself a more basic thing’ – in its overseas policies. What earlier editions of the book lacked, perhaps, was a overarching theory of why the imperatives of power were so

fundamental. What such a theory might now be, however, is a lot clearer. Since the late 1970s, at the same time as imperial studies have been increasingly influenced by cultural post-modernism,⁵ an equally significant, if less remarked upon, historiographical development has been taking place, and that is the re-emergence into historical discourse of 'geopolitics'. Historians of the Cold War quickly saw it was an indispensable theoretical concept for them. And so it is too for historians of empire.

On re-reading earlier editions of *Britain's Imperial Century* I am astonished to discover how sparingly I used the word 'geopolitical': not at all in the first edition, and only three times in the second (97, 204, 241). It is always implicit and sometimes masquerading as *strategic*, but I would now prominently flag conceptually 'the primacy of geopolitics'. The study of empire and expansion is *essentially* about geopolitics.⁶ Historians of the Russian empire, and of 'the Great Game' in Central Asia – such as Geoffrey Hosking,⁷ Dominic Lieven,⁸ and Edward Ingram⁹ – have been among the first to realise this. There is also a significant but controversial book on the Irish problem by G.R. Sloan, *The Geopolitics of Anglo-Irish Relations in the Twentieth Century* (1997), which focuses on the strategic importance of Ireland to Britain until 1993.¹⁰

'Geopolitics' is a politico-strategic concept which relates a state's global position and its interstate contacts to the configurations of world space, geography, and military requirements. A more reductionist definition might be simply 'taking a global-political view'.¹¹ 'Strategy' is essentially what is deduced from these considerations. It does not predicate a crude 'geographical determinism', but rather postulates geopolitical opportunity or anxiety. It is much concerned with the study of maps, alarm about boundaries and frontiers, routes and communications. Empires have to be seen as operating in a global geopolitically-contested context. The macrocosmic strategic imperatives derived from it were often manufactured, imagined or illusory, but nevertheless had a plausible logic of their own and often swayed high-political decision-making.¹²

All states worry about other states' assessments of their geopolitical strength, so the dynamics of government thinking are driven by prestige. To quote F.H. Hinsley once more: concern for state prestige 'is the essence of being a Great

Power'.¹³ What is prestige? Harold Nicolson defined it as 'power based upon reputation', an amalgam of the two, something which has to be acquired by power but can only be retained by reputation: prestige is thus more durable than power alone. More pithily, and according to Dean Acheson, the American secretary of state, 'prestige is the shadow cast by power'.¹⁴

What other fundamental insights can a geopolitical approach suggest? As Sir Halford Mackinder (the 'father of geopolitics') pointed out early in the twentieth century, although customary map-projections obscure the fact, the Atlantic is a rounded basin, and the archipelago of British islands on the edge of the Eurasian landmass is centrally placed on its northern rim. This position – which can be verified by looking down over a globe from a position over the north pole – gave the British unobscured access to the 'world's unified ocean', and thus to most of the historic parts of global civilisation. The island-state, relatively safe at home, was free to expand outwards, and so in modern times 'a vast imperial nodality has been accumulated in London during the centuries characterised by oceanic mobility'. Britain, Mackinder argued, had benefited enormously from the geopolitical opportunity of its geographical position: 'territorial expansion was much easier at the [European] system's edges than at its continental core', because it was harder for rival states to contain.¹⁵

Britain controlled Europe's access to much of the outside world, and during the eighteenth century wars locked its rivals up in Europe and out-ran them in the extra-European race. Moreover, being outside the continent, Britain was not tempted as were continental states to associate power or security with subduing Europe to its hegemonic authority.¹⁶ Initially involved in seaborne commercial expansion, the British became by a most extraordinary achievement the ruler of India (or much of it), and thus an Asian land-based empire, rather than an uncomplicated thalassocratic one. This transition brought the imperial system, in the North-West frontier of India, hard up against one of the world's other fundamental and unyielding geopolitical facts, Russian dominance of the Eurasian 'heartland'. This rivalry, the 'Great Game', was something which 'provided a world role for the British empire'. The possession and defence of India, the need to ensure communications with

it, and the fear of the French which followed from this, were quintessential concerns of the British empire. A 'geopolitical template' was drawn during the Napoleonic Wars. It continued to govern British official thinking about the Middle East and the Mediterranean right through to the Suez fiasco of 1956.¹⁷

At the height of late-nineteenth-century geopolitical nervousness, Lord Salisbury came to the conclusion that 'the constant study of maps is apt to disturb men's reasoning powers'.¹⁸ Strategists, he commented ruefully, 'would like to annex the moon in order to prevent its being appropriated by the planet Mars'.¹⁹

1 The Foundations of Power, 1815–1870

THE PROJECT OF AN EMPIRE

When you come to think of it, there was no such thing as Greater Britain, still less a British empire – India perhaps apart. There was only a ragbag of territorial bits and pieces, some remaindered remnants, some pre-empted luxury items, some cheap samples. All that red on the map represented in truth at best only a dominion of opinion and a grand anomaly, and at worst a temptation to illusions of grandeur and a gross abuse. There was always a fundamental hiatus in the imperial bureaucratic process: the impossibility, in the last resort, of translating the democratic political decisions of one society into the totally different political realities of another, the problem of producing any kind of real relation between policy determined in London and the practice of government on the spot. Before the coming of the telegraph, even the imperfect translation of will into act could in many places be a matter of years, or perhaps decades. There was also the problem of getting public support at home for the effective maintenance of the empire, for it was the public, not the policy-makers, who behaved with a ‘fit of absence of mind’ about the empire for much of the century. As the 15th Earl of Derby shrewdly remarked, ‘Kings and aristocracies may govern empires, but one people cannot rule another’.

British empire and expansion was a set of aspirations and activities only loosely held together, chiefly by the defining limits and overshadowing realities of the American Republic and the Indian Empire. Between the challenge of the United States and the problem of India was hammered out all that was constructive in Britain’s imperial century: for example, its insistent resort constitutionally to a federal panacea and its fitful concern morally for humanitarian trusteeship. In so far as imperial Britain operated a system, its economic centre was the Atlantic Ocean with the United States an integral part; and its strategic centre was the Indian Ocean based on the continental powerhouse of the Indian Army. British interests throughout the nineteenth