



Economic History of Empire – Trade in the British Empire in the 19th Century

Interview with Brian Varian

Reading List

Canonical texts

Each of these texts is older. Nonetheless, at least some element of each has been unsurpassed, down to the present day. Each presents a balance between technical analysis and description.

Imlah, A. H., *Economic elements in the Pax Britannica: studies in British foreign trade in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

Saul, S. B., *Studies in British overseas trade, 1870–1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1960).

Schlote, W., *British overseas trade from 1700 to the 1930s*, W. H. Chaloner and W. O. Henderson, trans. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952).

Chapters most suitable for A-Level students

These chapters would be most intelligible to A-level students. However, only portions of each of these chapters are germane to our topic. N.b. The readings are from different editions of the Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain.

Harley, C., 'Trade: discovery, mercantilism and technology', in R. Floud and P. Johnson, eds., *Cambridge economic history of modern Britain, vol. I, Industrialisation, 1700–1860*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 175–203.

Zahedieh, N., 'Overseas trade and empire', in R. Floud, J. Humphries, and P. Johnson, eds., *Cambridge economic history of modern Britain, vol. I, 1700–1870*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 392–420.

More recent texts

These are more recent texts giving substantial attention to our topic. They should not be beyond the comprehension of better A-level students.

Magee, G. B. and Thompson, A. S., *Empire and globalisation: networks of people, goods and capital in the British world, c.1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

O'Rourke, K. H. and Williamson, J. G., *Globalization and history: the evolution of a nineteenth-century Atlantic economy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

Technical articles

These articles and working paper concern the late-nineteenth (and very early-twentieth) century. They are more technical, but the findings should still be of interest to students. The introductory and conclusory sections of these articles are written so as to be accessible for a broad audience.

Jacks, D. S., O'Rourke, K. H., Taylor, A. M., and Yotov, Y., 'Distance, empire, and British exports over two centuries', NBER Working Paper no. 27904 (2025).

Keay, I. and Varian, B. D., 'The impact of preferential market access: British imports into Canada, 1892–1903', *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 57 (2024), pp. 140–64.

Mitchener, K. J. and Weidenmier, M., 'Trade and empire', *Economic Journal*, 118 (2008), pp. 1805–34.

Sullivan, E., 'Revealing a preference: imperial preference and the Commonwealth tariff, 1901–14', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 29 (2001), pp. 35–64.

Varian, B. D., 'Imperial preference before the Ottawa Agreements: evidence from New Zealand's Preferential and Reciprocal Trade Act of 1903', *Economic History Review*, 75 (2022), pp. 1214–41.