Eighteenth-century Britain and its Empire

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The concept of an 'English' or even of a 'British' empire has been in use at least from the sixteenth century. What the term then conveyed was of course very different from what it was to convey in modern times. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, contemporaries were beginning to envisage empire in the way that it was to be envisaged by the Victorians or in the twentieth century. Empire for late eighteenth century opinion, as for later generations of British people, meant British rule exercised over a great extent of territory and a very wide variety of peoples all over the globe.

In spite of its long life, even in a recognisably modern form, study and writing about the British empire and teaching about in schools and higher education tend to focus strongly on late nineteenth-century 'imperialism' or on the twentieth century and the end of empire. There are, however, welcome signs of growing interest in earlier periods. The eighteenth century, and especially the second half of it, certainly merits the attention that it is now beginning to get.

In the history of British imperial expansion the eighteenth century was the formative phase in setting the pattern for the future empire. There was a huge growth in British trade with North America and a large volume of migration there. Both were to accelerate throughout the nineteenth century, but an empire of rule in North America south of the 49th parallel was to prove ephemeral. The thirteen colonies and much of the new territory very recently added to them passed out of British political control with the American Revolution. On the other hand, a huge new empire of rule was being created at the same time in eastern India. British rule was shortly to engulf the rest of the sub-continent and to intrude into Southeast Asia. In 1788 a permanent British presence in Australasia was established by the fleet that took the first convicts to Botany Bay in New South Wales. Further settlements around the Australian coast and in New Zealand would follow. In short, by the end of the eighteenth century the outlines were already in place of a British empire that was only to be significantly enlarged in new directions by the late nineteenth-century and post-First World War partitions. British involvement in the empire that was being created in the later eighteenth century was at least as intense as in any later period. Evidence of this involvement is overwhelming in terms of the proportion of overseas trade going to the empire, the attention given to it by government and parliament, the commitment to it of military and naval forces, the volume of emigration and the ambitions of sections of British society for employment there, and the extent to which a wider public was supplied with material about it in the press and in books.

Changing Concepts of Empire

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the term British empire had various connotations. It was used to describe the union after 1603 under a common crown of Ireland, Scotland and England or the integration of Scotland and England under the Act of Union of 1707. It was also recognised that the English crown had an empire in America with the West Indian and North American 'plantations'. Finally, the English monarchy claimed a dominion over the seas. This was in part a legalistic claim to the seas round the British Isles, but it was also a boast about the capacity of English trade and shipping, supported by English naval power, to dominate the commerce of all the world's oceans. For early eighteenth-century opinion the British empire was very much a matter of seaborne trade and naval power. It was an 'empire of the deep', a 'dominion of the seas'. The purpose of the colonies was to augment Britain's trade by supplying commodities that could not be produced in Britain and to act as a market for British manufactures. It was a belligerent empire in the sense that British naval power was popularly regarded as an instrument to break down obstacles placed by other European powers to the spread of British commerce. Force should also be used to resist the pretensions of Britain's rivals, above all of France, to world-wide domination or 'universal monarchy', as it was called. The accepted view of Britain's role in the world was that it had no such ambitions for itself. Large territorial conquests involving the subjugation of indigenous peoples would be abhorrent, even if the seizure of the trading ports or plantation colonies of other powers might be a legitimate object of war.

Underlying the rhetoric of an early eighteenth-century British maritime empire was the insistence that it was an empire of freedom. If the enslaved Africans or the Irish and native Americans who had been dispossessed in the process of plantation were conveniently forgotten, it was an empire made up of communities of Protestant British people on both sides of the Atlantic, enjoying the English inheritance of civil rights and representative government and the religious freedom deemed to be inherent in Protestantism. It was axiomatic that the freedom and the commercial prosperity of the empire were linked to one another. The security of an empire of free people depended on its navy, not on garrisons drawn from a regular standing army, in itself the instrument of despotic rule. As a poet in Boston, Massachusetts, put it:

Our thundering Navy bold
Ambition checks,
And bears chastizing Vengeance
on her Decks;
Those dreadful Bulwarks wear
great GEORGE'S Cause,
Of Honour, Justice, Property and
Laws.[1]

This rhetoric of a free, maritime, commercial British empire was to keep much of its force in the later eighteenth century and well beyond, but a different kind of empire, based on the conquest of territory and the incorporation of peoples, who were neither British, nor Protestant, nor the inheritors of institutions supposedly guaranteeing freedom, was also coming into existence. The turning point was the Seven Years' War, formally lasting from 1756 to 1763, and the events immediately after it in India. A new wave of conquests followed thirty years later in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. As a result of these waves of conquest, the British ruled over Catholic French Canadians, for a time over greatly increased numbers of native Americans, over Dutch and African peoples at the Cape and, through the East India Company over millions of Hindus and Muslims. The new subjects of the British empire were for the most part deemed not to be suited to British institutions of representative government nor to the personal freedoms of the English common law. They were ruled in more or less authoritarian ways under British governors, but were guaranteed the use of their own systems of law as they were the free observance of their religious beliefs. Garrisons of British troops or in the new Indian provinces of Indian sepoys were the ultimate assurance of their loyalty.

British opinion was by no means unanimous in welcoming the rise of this new world empire. All the maxims of ancient history, let alone a reading of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, suggested that expanding territorial empires based on conquest were inherently unstable and would outgrow the capacity of their rulers to control them. Moreover, it was received wisdom that a free people could not conquer and subjugate other peoples, especially Asian peoples who would spread the contagion of despotism and luxury to them, without losing their own freedom. Authoritarian rule overseas would inevitably lead to authoritarian rule at home. Yet more and more British people in the later eighteenth century came to believe that Britain was endowed with a virtue that the ancient empires had lacked. As early as 1763 a letter to a newspaper pointed out that the British empire now matched the Roman one 'both in power and extent of territory', but that it was

This cartoon of 1738 reflects resentment at the failure of Walpole's government to enforce Britain's 'empire of the seas' against Spain. Walpole prevents the British lion from rescuing sailors from slavery. In the background Captain Jenkins loses his ear and the Spanish fire on British ships.
Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum

'within the reach of the science of government to keep [Britain] from the like destruction' that had befallen Rome.[2] It was possible for the British to rule other people more or less despotically but with justice and benevolence and at the same time for them successfully to resist the corruptions of power. Those who had been reforming the East India Company's government in Bengal congratulated themselves that they had been able to found 'the security of our dominions and our national interests, on the prosperity of the conquered country and the happiness of its numerous inhabitants'.[3]

The Rewards of Empire
Whatever doubts may have been felt about an empire increasingly built on conquest, it would require a person of unusual degree of scruple to contemplate foregoing the material advantages of empire both to the nation and for the multitudes of individuals involved in it. Very few were in fact willing to do so.

Trade with the world outside Europe had two important roles for pre-industrial Britain. In the first place, it supplied commodities, usually ones not obtainable in Europe, for British consumption or for re-export from Britain to foreign markets. The most important of these commodities were tobacco from Virginia, sugar from the West Indies, indigo and rice from South Carolina, cotton cloth and raw silk from India, tea from China and at the end of the century raw cotton from Brazil and the West Indies. By then some 30 per cent of British imports were coming from the Americas and 25 per cent from Asia. The importance of the non-European world, above all of America, for British exports was even more marked. With British

'The Tobacco Fleet at Anchor, Port Glasgow'. Eighteenth-century Glasgow's prosperity was built on the tobacco trade with the Chesapeake colonies, Maryland and Virginia.
Reproduced courtesy of the Mitchell Library, Glasgow

manufacturing enjoying only limited technological advantages until late in the century and with strong protective barriers to most European markets, the growth of a largely new market of prosperous white consumers under British control in North America was invaluable. Together with the West Indies it took nearly 60 per cent of British exports by the end of the century.[4]

Many parts of the British Isles benefited from trade with the empire. The western ports handled a large proportion of the Atlantic trade: by mid-century Bristol was specialising in the West Indian sugar trade, Liverpool in the African trade, including of course the bulk of the slave trade, and Glasgow in tobacco. London was the home of the East India Company as well as being the base from which much colonial trade was financed. The demand of the American market powerfully stimulated the manufacture of metal goods in the west Midlands, of woollen cloth in south Yorkshire and of luxury items in London. The west of Ireland did well out of the provision trade across the Atlantic, above all for the West Indies. Whether the profits of colonial trade were ploughed back into new industries or the infrastructure of

communications on a scale sufficient to stimulate industrialisation remains largely unproven, except in certain specific areas, like the hinterland of Glasgow in western Scotland, where the evidence is clear.

In the seventeenth century large numbers of poor migrants from the British Isles had been shipped as servants to open up land in the West Indies and in the southern mainland colonies. By the eighteenth century the labour force in these areas came mostly from Africa. Unskilled labourers and convicts were still being sent from Britain to America, but emigrants tended increasingly to be people who migrated more or less voluntarily in hopes of improving their lot. Vacant land was the great attraction in North America, especially after the French had been rolled back from the British frontiers after the Seven Years' War. Speculators in Britain and the colonies competed avidly for land grants and they and merchant entrepreneurs encouraged new settlers from Britain to cross the Atlantic. The largest numbers came from northern Ireland and from Scotland, especially from the Highlands, after the Seven Years War. In spite of ferocious mortality through disease, the West Indies also attracted migrants who, often starting as clerks, craftsmen or slave drivers, hoped to become planters. As trade developed and town life became increasingly sophisticated, ambitious young males went to America to try to set up their own businesses or to act as factors or agents for British merchant houses. There were also increasing opportunities for professional people, lawyers and above all the doctors who came out of the Scottish medical schools in such quantities.

In Asia opportunities for European migrants were obviously limited: there was little demand for European labour, apart from military labour, and commercial opportunities were restricted by the monopoly of the East India Company. Yet such opportunities as there were could be spectacularly lucrative. It was possible for European merchants, often the employees of the Company, to trade profitably under the Company's umbrella, and war and the conquest of Indian provinces in the later eighteenth century made the fortunes of army officers and administrators who were in the right place at the right time. Robert Clive, who left India worth nearly half a million pounds, became a notorious example of the spoils of empire. More characteristic than the great fortunes of the few, however, was the wide range of salaried public offices, attractive to people with ambitions to gentility, which the East India Company could offer. Whereas in the American or West Indian colonies public funds were restricted and most offices went to local people, the East India Company collected a huge revenue in taxation and spent part of it on its own army, which was employing more than 3000 officers by the end of the eighteenth century, and on its own civil service. Scottish families were particularly committed to Indian military careers.

Enduring patterns of either permanent emigration or long-term imperial service had been established that were to link wide sections of the population of the British Isles to the empire in the future. During the nineteenth century mass transatlantic migration, most of it until late in the nineteenth century to the independent United States, was to offer relief for the impoverished from Ireland and from British cities. Those who hoped for their own stake in the land or for a genteel career in military, civil or professional employment and found that they could not make headway at home could turn to the apparently boundless acres of Canada, Australasia or southern Africa or to the bounty of the East India Company. Service in imperial

garrisons was to expose much of the British army to long sojourns in the empire.

The Empire in Politics

The wealth generated by colonial trades had attracted the attention of English governments from early in the seventeenth century. Regulations were enacted, notably the Navigation Acts after 1660, to ensure that this trade passed through England to the benefit of the English economy and revenues of the crown. Measures were also taken to provide for the defence of the colonies in time of war. The seventeenth-century trade regulations remained essentially intact throughout the following century, while the commitment of British resources to colonial wars, at first in North America and the West Indies and later in India, steadily increased. In making these increased commitments, British ministers were partly responding to their own assessments of the importance of the colonial trades and partly responding to public pressure. Britain's ability to hold its own against its European rivals was thought to rest in good measure on its colonies. There were, in the first place, believed to be close links between colonial trade and naval power. Colonial trades required substantial ocean-going ships, thought to be a most valuable training ground for sailors for the navy in time of war. Secondly, colonial trades were an important prop of the financial system that enabled Britain to maintain large armies and fleets and to subsidise its allies in wartime. Long-distance overseas trades were conducted on a large scale, which made it relatively easy for the crown to collect customs revenue from them and also meant that they involved great trading companies and rich individual merchants who had an important role as lenders to government. By the mid-eighteenth century ministers were convinced that the colonial trades made so fundamental a contribution to the welfare of the British economy and to the strength of British public finances that their defence was a matter of the most urgent national priority. Britain must risk a major European war rather than suffer incursions on her overseas interests by a foreign power.

This view was raucously echoed in public debate. A newspaper proclaimed in 1755 that the war then being waged in North America was about whether 'France shall dispossess us of all our colonies, the fountain and foundation of all our trade, wealth and maritime power', and thus whether Britain would be reduced to being a province of France.[5] Such sentiments had been the stock of opposition politics since early in the eighteenth century. They were particularly aimed against what were thought to be ministerial predilections for the continental wars and inflated armies desired for their own un-British purposes by Britain's Dutch or Hanoverian kings.

Both public and government were agreed on the importance of overseas war, at least from the Seven Years' War onwards. Then for the first time America rather than Europe became the major theatre of war. In the War of the American Revolution Britain fought a world-wide war against France, Spain and the Netherlands without any European involvement except for the defence of Gibraltar. This war had been triggered by ministers' sense, widely shared in the country as a whole, that the secession of the American colonies from the British empire would be fatal to Britain's national power. Even in the 1790s the major

'General Johnson saving a wounded French officer from the Tomahawk of a North American Indian'. This painting by the American artist Benjamin West celebrates the victory of colonial American troops and their Indian Allies over the French in 1755 at the battle of Lake George. William Johnson, British agent with the Mohawks, intervenes to save the French commander, Baron Diskau.
Reproduced courtesy of the Derby Museums and Art Gallery.

British war effort was in the West Indies not against Revolutionary France in Europe. The arguments used by ministers to defend the vast deployment of troops to be decimated by disease in the Caribbean were the same as those used throughout the eighteenth century to justify the commitment of resources in the colonies. Britain's navy, the health of her economy and her public finances depended on the colonial trades, which must at all costs be protected.

For most of the century defence and war rather than the governance of colonies were the colonial issues that absorbed the attention of government and parliament. The expansion and diversification of the empire after 1763, however, gave political prominence to questions of colonial government. Attempts to bring the American colonies under closer control passed through parliament and parliament had to wrestle with the problems of how to respond to colonial resistance. On the eve of the outbreak of fighting in 1775 whether to coerce the American colonies or not

became a great public issue with nearly 100 petitions or addresses being signed by some 50,000 people.[6] The degree of toleration extended to Catholicism in Quebec in 1774 aroused intense public debate. Indian issues also took up much parliamentary time. The extent to which the East India Company should submit to state control in the government of its new provinces was fiercely debated on numerous occasion, culminating in a major political crisis in 1783 in which a government, the Fox-North coalition, lost office, ostensibly because it brought forward an unacceptably draconian reform of the Company. The two leading servants of the Company, Clive and Warren Hastings both faced parliamentary inquisition, Hastings being put on trial for seven years before the House of Lords. A motion for the abolition of the slave trade first came before parliament in 1789 and the question was to be repeatedly debated thereafter.

Empire and Britishness

To what extent did involvement with an overseas empire change British peoples' sense of who they were? Empire helped to cement a common sense of a Britishness embracing the British Isles as a whole. Empire was indeed a common British venture in which English, Scots and Irish mingled. Scots were deeply involved, from the huge numbers of soldiers, many from the Highlands, recruited to serve abroad and often becoming permanent emigrants, to the merchants and their agents dealing in tobacco and sugar, the East India Company civil servants and army officers and the numerous Scottish colonial governors. The empire was also a boon to some ambitious Irish. Ulster people were great migrants to America from the 1720s. Large-scale emigration from the south and mass recruitment of poor Catholics into the British army were clearly under way by the end of the century.

The answer to any question about how Britain came to be defined by empire will vary with changes in the popular perception of what empire might mean during the eighteenth century. In the first half of the century and for long after, a wide British public gloried in Britain's apparent capacity to sustain an 'empire of the deep', especially against Spanish and French enemies. The prowess of British naval power outside Europe, hymned in James Thomson's 'Rule Britannia' or David Garrick's 'Heart of Oak', reinforced a British sense of being a free and prosperous as well as a war-like people, but may not have had many imperial implications, in the sense of glorying in the exercise of power over people and territory.

In the second half of the century the exercise of such power was unmistakable. Britain was becoming the new Rome. An obvious question that followed was how far would Britain imitate Rome in extending its citizenship to the peoples of the empire? White people who lived in North America or the West Indies had always seen themselves as British or English. They claimed 'the rights of Englishmen' right up to the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Did British people reciprocate?

The evidence is hard to interpret. Among those who ruled the British empire on the eve of the Revolution there seems to have been a willingness to see 'Americans' (a term by no means yet fully accepted) as British, so long as they in turn accepted the obligations of British subjects, obedience to crown and parliament even to the point of paying taxes voted by parliament. When Americans refused those terms, they found a strong body of British opinion, even if there were many who dissented from it, that rejected their status as fellow citizens, and talked, as Benjamin Franklin put it, of '*OUR Subjects in the Colonies*'.[7]

Questions of common citizenship with Africans transported across the ocean to serve as slaves under laws enacted in British colonies hardly arose for the mass of British people. The anti-slave trade campaign was, however, predicated on a common humanity with Africans, as in the famous question, 'Am I not a man and a brother?' And a limited number of Africans, estimates usually putting them at around 20,000 in the later eighteenth century, appeared in Britain. Slavery had no standing in English law, but whether it was a status that could be enforced in Britain was an issue upon which, contrary to what is often supposed, British judges were unwilling to give a definitive opinion. In spite of this, exercising their rights over 'their' slaves seems to have become increasingly difficult for 'masters', and a free black population, a few conspicuous by their talents and acceptance in polite circles, most very poor, became a small segment of British society. A trickle of Indian visitors remained exotic rarities, apart from a number of seamen, called 'lascars', periodically stranded in London. Eighteenth-century opinion was not prepared, any more than succeeding British generations would be, to contemplate any sharing of Britishness with the apparently alien millions in the subcontinent.

In general the metropolitan inhabitants of the new Rome seem to have been far more disposed to find new subjects in the empire rather than fellow citizens. Britishness remained largely confined to the British Isles with considerable reservations about Ireland. Other peoples were arranged in a hierarchy of inferiority to the British. In the eighteenth century, given the continuing persistence of beliefs in a single act of creation as recorded in the book of Genesis, this hierarchy was rarely based on strictly racial criteria. The criteria were usually drawn from concepts of social evolution, from primitive or savage societies to the polished 'commercial' societies of Europe. Obedience to imperial authority was due from less evolved people who had come under British rule. In return they could expect benevolent and just government, that would guarantee them civil rights and security of property, if not of course political rights, for which they were deemed to be unfitted. In time under British rule the peoples of the empire might even begin to climb the ladder of social progress. Such a sense of imperial mission lay behind campaigns against slavery or to reform British government in India. This sense of mission was of course built on a sense of superiority and inferiority, which was deeply rooted in eighteenth-century culture; in the British case it was being powerfully reinforced by the experience of empire.

References

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2. *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 11–13 July 1763.
3. G. H. Barlow to Lord Cornwallis, 24 October 1795, Public Record Office, PRO, 30/11/55, ff. 116–17.
4. These estimates are taken from Phyllis Deane and W. A. Cole, *British Economic Growth, 1688–1959*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1967), p. 34.
5. *Monitor*, 6 December 1755.
6. James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in Britain* (Macon, 1986), pp. 135–7.
7. Cited in P. J. Marshall, 'Britain and the World in the Eighteenth Century: II, Britons and Americans', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., IX (1999), 11.

Further Reading

The Oxford History of the British Empire, vol. II, The Eighteenth Century (Oxford, 1998), edited by P. J. Marshall covers many aspects of the eighteenth-century empire. As its title suggests, H. V. Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise and the Making of the British Overseas Empire, 1688–1775* (Houndmills, 1996) deals with the involvement of the British upper classes, while Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995) analyses popular perceptions. *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815*, edited by Lawrence Stone (London, 1994) is a valuable collection of essays.

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This painting by Tilly Kettle depicts an East Indian Company officer, and an Indian soldier or sepoy. In the second half of the eighteenth century the Company built up what amounted to a second British army in India, drawing on the huge number of men already accustomed to bearing arms.
Courtesy of the Director, National Army Museum, London.