

British Empire in the 19th century

Overview

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Great Britain during Victoria's reign was not just a powerful island nation. It was the center of a global empire that fostered British contact with a wide variety of other cultures, though the exchange was usually an uneven one. By the end of the nineteenth century, nearly one-quarter of the earth's land surface was part of the British Empire, and more than 400 million people were governed from Great Britain, however nominally. An incomplete list of British colonies and quasi-colonies in 1901 would include Australia, British Guiana (now Guyana), Brunei, Canada, Cyprus, Egypt, Gambia, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Hong Kong, British India (now Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), Ireland, Kenya, Malawi, the Malay States (Malaysia), Malta, Mauritius, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Somaliland (Somalia), South Africa, the Sudan, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Trinidad and Tobago.

Queen Victoria's far-flung empire was a truly heterogeneous entity, governed by heterogeneous practices. It included Crown Colonies like Jamaica, ruled from Britain, and protectorates like Uganda, which had relinquished only partial sovereignty to Britain. Ireland was a sort of internal colony whose demands for home rule were alternately entertained and discounted. India had started the century under the control of the East India Company, but was directly ruled from Britain after the 1857 Indian Mutiny (the first Indian war of independence), and Victoria was crowned Empress of India in 1877. Colonies like Canada and Australia with substantial European populations had become virtually self-governing by the end of the century and were increasingly considered near-equal partners in the imperial project. By contrast, colonies and protectorates with large indigenous populations like Sierra Leone, or with large transplanted populations of ex-slaves and non-European laborers like Trinidad, would not gain autonomy until the twentieth century.

As Joseph Chamberlain notes in "The True Conception of Empire," the catastrophic loss of the American colonies had given rise to a certain disenchantment with empire-building. But despite a relative lack of interest in the British imperial project during the early nineteenth century, the Empire continued to grow, acquiring a number of new territories as well as greatly expanding its colonies in Canada and Australia and steadily pushing its way across the Indian subcontinent. A far more rapid expansion took place between 1870 and 1900, three decades that witnessed a new attitude towards and practice of empire-building known as the new imperialism and which would continue until World War I. During this period Britain was involved in fierce competition for new territories with its European rivals, particularly in Africa. It was becoming increasingly invested, imaginatively and ideologically, in the idea of empire. It found itself more and more dependent on a global economy and committed to finding (and forcing) new trading partners, including what we might call virtual colonies, nations that were not officially part of the Empire but were economically in thrall to powerful Great Britain. All of these motives helped fuel the new imperialism. British expansion was not allowed to progress unchallenged — the Empire went to war with the Ashanti, the Zulus, and the Boers, to name a few, and critics like J. J. Thomas and John Atkinson Hobson (*NAEL* 8, 2.1632-34) denounced imperialism as a corrupt and debasing enterprise — but it progressed at an astonishing pace nonetheless.

The distinction between imperialism and colonialism is difficult to pin down, because the two activities can seem indistinguishable at times. Roughly speaking, imperialism involves the claiming and exploiting of territories outside of one's own national boundaries for a variety of motives. For instance, Great Britain seized territories in order to increase its own holdings and enhance its prestige, to secure trade routes, to obtain raw materials such as sugar, spices, tea, tin, and rubber, and to procure a market for its own goods. Colonialism involves the settling of those territories and the transformation — the Victorians would have said reformation — of the social structure, culture, government, and economy of the people found there. Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" gives us a good sense of this kind of interventionist colonialism at work.

The Empire did not found colonies in all of its possessions, nor were colony populations necessarily interested in anglicizing the indigenous peoples they shared space with, as is clear from Anthony Trollope's dismissive assessment of the Australian aborigines. But in general Great Britain was able to justify its expansion into other peoples' lands by claiming a civilizing mission based on its own moral, racial, and national superiority. As we see from the selections by Edward Tylor and Benjamin Kidd, late-Victorian science sought to prove that non-Europeans were less evolved, biologically and culturally, and thus unable properly to govern themselves or develop their own territories. Other writers like W. Winwood Reade and Richard Marsh described the imperfectly evolved colonial subjects as fearsome cannibals and beasts, hardly human at all. Thus they were patently in need of taming, and taking on this job was "The White Man's Burden" in Rudyard Kipling's famous phrase.

Empire, Race and, Victorian Science

Edward Tylor, from *Primitive Culture* (1871)

http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_4/tylor.htm

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) was an important figure in establishing anthropology's place among the human sciences. Tylor, who specialized in primitive religion, was a professor and museum curator at Oxford University.

In carrying on the great task of rational ethnography, the investigation of the causes which have produced the phenomena of culture, and of the laws to which they are subordinate, it is desirable to work out as systematically as possible a scheme of evolution of this culture along its many lines. In the following chapter, on the Development of Culture, an attempt is made to sketch a theoretical course of civilization among mankind, such as appears on the whole most accordant with the evidence. By comparing the various stages of civilization among races known to history, with the aid of archaeological inference from the remains of prehistoric tribes, it seems possible to judge in a rough way of an early general condition of man, which from our point of view is to be regarded as a primitive condition, whatever yet earlier state may in reality have lain behind it. This hypothetical primitive condition corresponds in a considerable degree to that of modern savage tribes, who, in spite of their difference and distance, have in common certain elements of civilization, which seem remains of an early state of the human race at large. If this hypothesis be true, then, notwithstanding the continual interference of degeneration, the main tendency of culture from primaeval up to modern times has been from savagery towards civilization. On the problem of this relation of savage to civilized life, almost every one of the thousands of facts discussed in the succeeding chapters has its direct bearing. Survival in Culture, placing all along the course of advancing civilization way-marks full of meaning to those who can decipher their signs, even now sets up in our midst primaeval monuments of barbaric thought and life. Its investigation tells strongly in favour of the view that the European may find among the Greenlanders or Maoris many a trait for reconstructing the picture of his own primitive ancestors. . . .

. . . In taking up the problem of the development of culture as a branch of ethnological research, a first proceeding is to obtain a means of measurement. Seeking something like a definite line along which to reckon progression and retrogression in civilization, we may apparently find it best in the classification of real tribes and nations, past and present. Civilization actually existing among mankind in different grades, we are enabled to estimate and compare it by positive examples. The educated world of Europe and America practically sets a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between those limits according as they correspond more closely to savage or to cultured life. The principal criteria of classification are the absence or presence, high or low development, of the industrial arts, especially metal-working, manufacture of implements and vessels, agriculture, architecture, &c., the extent of scientific knowledge, the definiteness of moral principles, the condition of religious belief and ceremony, the degree of social and political organization, and so forth. Thus, on the definite basis of compared facts, ethnographers are able to set up at least a rough scale of civilization. Few would dispute that the following races are arranged rightly in order of culture: — Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian. . . .

. . . [T]he pictures drawn by some travellers of savagery as a kind of paradisiacal state may be taken too exclusively from the bright side. . . . Savage moral standards are real enough, but they are far looser and weaker than ours. We may, I think, apply the often-repeated comparison of savages to children as fairly to their moral as to their intellectual condition. The better savage social life seems in but unstable equilibrium, liable to be easily upset by a touch of distress, temptation, or violence, and then it becomes the worse savage life, which we know by so many dismal and hideous examples. Altogether, it may be admitted that some rude tribes lead a life to be envied by some barbarous races, and even by the outcasts of higher nations. But that any known savage tribe would not be improved by judicious civilization, is a proposition which no moralist would dare to make; while the general tenour

of the evidence goes far to justify the view that on the whole the civilized man is not only wiser and more capable than the savage, but also better and happier, and that the barbarian stands between. . . .

. . . Arrest and decline in civilization are to be recognized as among the more frequent and powerful operations of national life. That knowledge, arts, and institutions should decay in certain districts, that peoples once progressive should lag behind and be passed by advancing neighbours, that sometimes even societies of men should recede into rudeness and misery — all these are phenomena with which modern history is familiar. In judging of the relation of the lower to higher stages of civilization, it is essential to gain some idea how far it may have been affected by such degeneration. What kind of evidence can direct observation and history give as to the degradation of men from a civilized condition towards that of savagery? In our great cities, the so-called "dangerous classes" are sunk in hideous misery and of depravity. If we have to strike a balance between the Papuans of New Caledonia and the communities of European beggars and thieves, we may sadly acknowledge that we have in our midst something worse than savagery. But it is not savagery; it is broken-down civilization. Negatively, the inmates of a Whitechapel casual ward and of a Hottentot kraal agree in their want of the knowledge and virtue of the higher culture. But positively, their mental and moral characteristics are utterly different. Thus, the savage life is essentially devoted to gaining subsistence from nature, which is just what the proletarian life is not. Their relations to civilized life — the one of independence, the other of dependence — are absolutely opposite. To my mind the popular phrases about "city savages" and "street Arabs" seem like comparing a ruined house to a builder's yard.

Benjamin Kidd, from *The Control of the Tropics* (1898)

http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_4/kidd.htm

*The Anglo-Irishman Benjamin Kidd (1858–1916) was a civil servant and amateur naturalist who became a best-selling author with his controversial *Social Evolution* (1894).*



The next principle, which it seems must be no less clearly recognized, is one which carries us a great stride forward from the past as soon as we begin to perceived the nature of the consequences which follow from its admission. It is that, nevertheless, there never has been, and there never will be, within any time with which we are practically concerned, such a thing as good government, in the European sense, of the tropics by the natives of these regions. The ultimate fact underlying all the relations of the white man to the tropics is one which really goes to the root of the whole question of the evolution which the race itself has undergone. The human race reached its earliest development where the conditions of earliest development where the conditions of life were easiest; namely, in the tropics. But throughout the whole period of human history the development of the race has taken place outwards from the tropics. Slowly but surely we see the seat of empire and authority moving like the advancing tide northward. The evolution in character which the race has undergone has been northwards from the tropics. The first step to the solution of the problem before us is simply to acquire the principle that in dealing with the *natural* inhabitants of the tropics we are dealing with peoples who represent the same stage in the history of the development of the race that the child does in the history of the development of the individual. The tropics will not, therefore, be developed by the natives themselves. However we may be inclined to hesitate before reaching this view, it is hard to see how assent to it can be withheld in the face of the consistent verdict of history in the past, and the unvarying support given to it by facts in the present. If there is any one inclined to challenge it, let him reflect for a moment on the evidence on the one side and the difficulty that will present itself to him of producing any serious facts on the other side. If we look to the native social systems of the tropical East, to the primitive savagery of Central Africa, to the West Indian Islands in the past in process of being assisted into the position of modern States by Great Britain, to the Black Republic of Hayti in the present, or to the Black Republic Hayti in the present or to modern Liberia in the future, the lesson seems everywhere the same; it is that there will be no development of the resources of the tropics under native government.

We come, therefore, to a clearly defined position. If we have to meet the fact that by force of circumstances the tropics *must* by force of circumstances the tropics *must* be developed, and if the evidence is equally be developed, and if the evidence is equally emphatic that such a development can only take place under the influence of the white man, we are confronted with a larger issue than any mere question of commercial policy or of national selfishness. The tropics in such circumstances can only be governed as a trust for civilization, and with a full sense of the responsibility which such a trust involves. The first principle of success in undertaking such a duty seems to the writer to be a clear recognition of the cardinal fact that in the tropics the white man lives and works only as a diver lives and works under water. Alike in a moral, in an ethical, and in a political sense, the atmosphere he breathes must be that of another region, that which produced him, and to which he belongs. Neither physically, morally, nor politically, can he be acclimatized in the tropics. The people among whom he lives and works are often separated from him by thousands of years of development; he cannot, therefore, be allowed to administer government from any local and lower standard he may develop. If he has any right there at all, he is there in the name of civilization; if our civilization has any right there at all, it is because it represents higher ideals of humanity, a higher type of social order. This is the lesson which, slowly and painfully, and with many a temporary reversion to older ideas, the British peoples have been learning in India for the last fifty years, and which has recently been applied in other circumstances to the government of Egypt.

J. J. Thomas, from *Froudacity* (1889)

http://www.wvnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_4/thomas.htm

John Jacob Thomas (c.1840–1889) was the descendent of slaves, born into poverty in Trinidad. A mostly self-educated intellectual, he was a linguist, folklorist, teacher, civil servant, philologist, and author. Froudacity was written during a visit to London, where Thomas died of tuberculosis.

We find paraded ostentatiously enough the doctrine that in the adjustment of human affairs the possession of a white skin should be the strongest recommendation. Wonder might fairly be felt that there is no suggestion of a corresponding advantage being accorded to the possession of a long nose or of auburn hair. Indeed, little or no attention that can be deemed serious is given to the interest of the Blacks, as a large and (out of Africa) no longer despicable section of the human family, in the great world-problems which are so visibly preparing and press for definitive solutions. The intra-African Negro is clearly powerless to struggle successfully against personal enslavement, annexation, or volunteer forcible "protection" of his territory. What, we ask, will in the coming ages be the opinion and attitude of the extra-African millions— ten millions in the Western Hemisphere— dispersed so widely over the surface of the globe, apt apprentices in every conceivable department of civilised culture? Will these men remain for ever too poor, too isolated from one another for grand racial combinations? Or will the naturally opulent cradle of their people, too long a prey to violence and unholy greed, become at length the sacred watchword of a generation willing and able to conquer or perish under its inspiration? . . .

. . . Accepting the theory of human development propounded by our author, let us apply it to the African race. Except, of course, to intelligences having a share in the Councils of Eternity, there can be no attainable knowledge respecting the laws which regulate the growth and progress of civilisation among the races of the earth. That in the existence of the human family every age has been marked by its own essential characteristics with regard to manifestations of intellectual life, however circumscribed, is a proposition too self-evident to require more than the stating. But investigation beyond such evidence as we possess concerning the past— whether recorded by man himself in the written pages of history, or by the Creator on the tablets of nature— would be worse than futile. We see that in the past different races have successively come to the front, as prominent actors on the world's stage. The years of civilised development have dawned in turn on many sections of the human family, and the Anglo-Saxons, who now enjoy preeminence, got their turn only after Egypt, Assyria,

Babylon, Greece, Rome, and others had successfully held the palm of supremacy. And since these mighty empires have all passed away, may we not then, if the past teaches aught, confidently expect that other racial hegemonies will arise in the future to keep up the ceaseless progression of

temporal existence towards the existence that is eternal? What is it in the nature of things that will oust the African race from the right to participate, in times to come, in the high destinies that have been assigned in times past to so many races that have not been in anywise superior to us in the qualifications, physical, moral, and intellectual, that mark out a race for prominence amongst other races?

The normal composition of the typical Negro has the testimony of ages to its essential soundness and nobility. Physically, as an active labourer, he is capable of the most protracted exertion under climatic conditions the most exhausting. By the mere strain of his brawn and sinew he has converted waste tracts of earth into fertile regions of agricultural bountifulness. On the scenes of strife he has in his savage state been known to be indomitable save by the stress of irresistible forces, whether of men or of circumstances. Staunch in his friendship and tender towards the weak directly under his protection, the unvitiated African furnishes in himself the combination of native virtue which in the land of his exile was so prolific of good results for the welfare of the whole slave-class. But distracted at home by the sudden irruptions of skulking foes, he has been robbed, both intellectually and morally, of the immense advantage of Peace, which is the mother of Progress. Transplanted to alien climes, and through centuries of desolating trials, this irrepressible race has bated not one throb of its energy, nor one jot of its heart or hope. . . .

. . . The above summary of our past vicissitudes and actual position shows that there is nothing in our political circumstances to occasion uneasiness. The miserable skin and race doctrine we have been discussing does not at all prefigure the destinies at all events of the West Indies, or determine the motives that will affect them. With the exception of those belonging to the Southern States of the Union, the vast body of African descendants now dispersed in various countries of the Western hemisphere are at sufficient peace to begin occupying themselves, according to some fixed programme, about matters of racial importance. More than ten millions of Africans are scattered over the wide area indicated, and possess amongst them instances of mental and other qualifications which render them remarkable among their fellow-men. But like the essential parts of a complicated albeit perfect machine, these attainments and qualifications so widely dispersed await, it is evident, some potential agency to collect and adjust them into the vast engine essential for executing the true purposes of the civilised African Race. Already, especially since the late Emancipation Jubilee, are signs manifest of a desire for intercommunion and intercomprehension amongst the more distinguished of our people. With intercourse and unity of purpose will be secured the means to carry out the obvious duties which are sure to devolve upon us, especially with reference to the cradle of our Race, which is most probably destined to be the ultimate resting-place and headquarters of millions of our posterity. Within the short time that we had to compass all that we have achieved, there could not have arisen opportunities for doing more than we have effected. Meanwhile our present device is: "Work, Hope, and Wait!"