

Tuesday 20 September 2011

**Empire in the Pre-Industrial World**

Professor Richard J Evans FBA

Gresham Professor of Rhetoric

In this series of six lectures I’m going to examine the rise and fall of European global hegemony from the fifteenth century to the present. It hardly needs saying that the subject is of obvious importance to the world today and how we understand it. Are we dealing here, for example, with the superiority of ‘the West’ over ‘the rest’ since 1500, as Niall Ferguson has recently claimed? I’ll begin in this first lecture by looking at the period from Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the Americas in 1492 to the end of the European empires in America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and see whether in fact this was the case. How did these empires emerge, how were they ruled, why did they collapse, and what was the legacy they left to the world?

The best place to start is with the fact that for many centuries, from the late Roman Empire until the early 14th century AD, Europe was repeatedly invaded from the East, the last time by Tamerlane, the feared Mongol leader who conquered Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Georgia, northern India, Syria and a large part of Russia. (1) After his death in 1410, Tamerlane’s empire rapidly fell apart. The states he defeated, from the Ottomans to the Muslim sultanate in India, quickly recovered, basing their power on agriculture and urban settlements rather than on the plunder and control of trade routes on which Tamerlane and earlier Mongol conquerors depended. The huge damage the Mongols inflicted on Central Asia helped give an economic advantage to Western and Central Europe. By the end of the century it was Europeans who were expanding, above all to the west but soon enough to the east as well.

What drove them to expand was a combination of religion and greed, an unholy alliance that has reared its head all too often in history. The Ottoman conquest of Byzantium in 1453 cut off much of the spice trade from the east, and what remained was a monopoly of the Venetians. So Spain and Portugal in particular began to look for alternative routes to the east. The Portuguese were driven to begin with by the religious crusade against Islam, which led them to sail down the western coast of Africa, until they came across sources of gold, ivory and slaves, which led them down to the Cape of Good Hope, circumnavigated by Bartolomeu Diaz in 1487. (2) From there they sailed north-east, bypassing the Ottoman-controlled Red Sea and setting up a series of trading bases in Asia as far east as Macau. Along with them went missionaries, above all Jesuits, seeking to convert Asians to Christianity. In the east, however, Europeans encountered large, powerful and well-organized states, notably the Chinese Empire, over whom they would have possessed no military advantage even had they possessed the resources to ship large numbers of infantry and cavalry across the Indian Ocean. Here’s a French map of 1700 that gives an idea of the empire’s extent at this time. (3) Until the so-called and much-debated ‘military revolution’ sparked in Europe by the Thirty Years’ War (from 1618 to 1648), European armies lacked the heavy fire-power needed to destroy enemy armies and conquer enemy towns and fortifications. The military strength of the Chinese, Arab, Ottoman and Islamic North African states was simply too great for Europeans to overcome.

Where an Asian state began to see serious disadvantages in contact with Europeans, it was able to expel them and keep them at bay. In 1689 for example a dispute between the English East India Company and the Mughal Empire led a Mughal fleet to bombard the trading port of Bombay and forced the British to ask for pardon, which was granted only when the British envoys prostrated themselves personally before the Mughal Emperor Aurangzheb, seen here with his falcon, holding court. (4) Thus until the middle of the 18th century Europeans were only interested in establishing small trading bases in the East, including India. Beginning with the Portuguese, Europeans set up lucrative trading arrangements, bringing back rich cargoes of spices, tea and similar goods home under trading monopolies that excluded other countries from their business. The Spanish elbowed the Portuguese aside in the Philippines, using them as a base for sending Chinese silk to the Americas, while the Dutch, French and British East India Companies made considerable sums of money from their own trading bases in the East. All these interlopers broke the Portuguese trading monopoly and eventually took over most of the Portuguese trading ports too, leaving them with Goa and Macao as their main bases. Annexation was not part of these companies’ business. Even in 1752 the directors of the French East India Company told the governor-general of Pondicherry that ‘the company fears any augmentation of its domain.’ (5)

Until the 1750s even the English East India Company avoided attempting to conquer territory and remained purely commercial. European trading companies relied on concluding trade treaties with local potentates, together with guarantees for their own safety and autonomy, to allow continued deliveries of spices and similar goods, as in this illustration of Javanese bringing nutmegs to a Dutch trading post. (6) But this made them dependent on local states remaining stable, and the very presence of the Europeans, with their economic penetration of the hinterland, the use of bribery, corruption and blackmail by individuals against Asian rulers for personal gain, their tactics of playing off local political factions against one another in the search for the best deal, and above all, perhaps, their rivalries with one another, especially acute at times like the Seven Years’ War in the middle of the 18th century, was a destabilizing factor. Similarly, local states could arouse European hostility if their financial demands were seen as being exorbitant. Thus in Ceylon, Sri Lanka, for example, quarrels with the King over the cinammon monopoly let to armed conflict and effective control by the Dutch over the royal administration, with cinammon being delivered free of charge after 1765. In Java a war between the two main states forced the Dutch to take sides, ending in victory for their clients and hugely increased influence for themselves. The Dutch capital at Batavia bore more than a passing resemblance to Amsterdam: by 1800 it was a large and imposing town, far more than a trading port. (7)

 In India, the Mughal Empire began to diintegrate from the beginning of the 18th century, as its religious intolerance and financial exactions roused growing opposition especially among the politically well organized Hindu caste of the Marathas; increasing disorder led to many provinces declaring their independence from the Empire, allowing the British to back one side or another, using their well-disciplined and well-armed troops to secure victory and with it plunder and tribute to recruit and train more ‘sepoys’ or Indian troops. European war with France in mid-century spilled over into India, the French being defeated by superior British naval power and a more successful British policy of alliance with native states. At the same time, in the 1750s, the struggle for supremacy in Bengal brought the British East India Company to support the enemies of the Nawab when he attacked a British base, leading to a series of British victories – notably the Battle of Plassey in 1757, won by Robert Clive – (8) which ended with the Moghul Emperor himself falling into British hands. Further conflicts with ambitious local rulers like Haidar Ali, who allied, alarmingly to the Company, with the remaining French forces in India, drew the British in further.

By the beginning of the 19th century the whole of southern India and Bengal was under British control, with the Company exercising control through puppet rulers, instructed by residents at local or regional courts, and backed by detachments of British troops. (9) The process continued with the conquest of central India and the defeat of the Marathas between 1816 and 1818, leaving the company in control of almost everything south and east of Sind and the Punjab. In the meantime, a series of corruption scandals in the late 18th century –leading most famously to the trial of Warren Hastings – (10) had led to Parliament intervening with the India Act of 1784 establishing a Board of Control appointed by the British government as a regulating body to oversee the company’s activities. The government set up a proper civil service separate from the Company’s commercial arm, to rule the territories annexed by the Company and organize the control of Indian puppet states. These arrangements lasted through the first half of the 19th century and beyond.

India was thus the great exception, the only parallel being in the Dutch East Indies. The disintegration of the powerful Mughal Empire combined with conflicts within Europe to draw the British in, often reluctantly, until they controlled directly or indirectly almost the entire sub-continent. Where major states remained powerful and well organized, as, notably, in China and Japan, the Europeans were only able to gain a foothold for trading purposes, and their position continued to be precarious. One of the reasons why the Portuguese fared so badly was their religious intolerance and missionary zeal; the Dutch and British by contrast allowed religious tolerance in the areas they controlled and so defused potential opposition. It was Portuguese penetration that in 1635 prompted the Japanese shogunate to break off contact with Europeans, cementing its triumph with large-scale massacres of Christian converts. (16)

By contrast, Europeans had a distinct military advantage when it came to confrontation with states and societies located in Africa and the Americas. In Africa the climate deterred settlement, except at the Cape, where the Dutch East India Company founded a trading base that soon attracted large numbers of Dutch immigrants. Everywhere else, however, Europeans mostly confined themselves to setting up trading bases, such as this Portuguese one in Benin in the 16th century, (12) for slaves, gold and ivory, which they obtained from African states and Arab traders.

In the Americas too, the initial purpose was trading. Columbus, who considerably underestimated the size of the Earth, set sail westward in order to reach Asia, and never admitted he, had discovered another continent, continuing to the end of his days to describe the inhabitants of the Americas as Indians, a term that stuck for centuries after Europeans knew it was wrong. Nevertheless, as depicted here in this later, somewhat romanticized version, he claimed possession of the land for the Spanish King. (13)

After Columbus, further expeditions by men such as Cortes and Pizarro who became known as the Conquistadors searched for gold and silver rather than the non-existent spices. The major civilizations they encountered – the Aztecs and Incas – were easily defeated in the first place because they lacked the military equipment of the Spaniards – firearms, steel blades, cavalry and even armoured and specially trained war-dogs. (14) (15) The Europeans also introduced devastating diseases to the previously isolated inhabitants of America, above all, smallpox but also typhus and measles, reducing their population by as much as 90 per cent in a few years, sapping morale as well as destroying whole armies. (16) This factor of course was not operative in the case of Asia, whose inhabitants had long since acquired immunity through trading and other contacts. Elsewhere in the Americas the loosely-organized tribes or nomadic peoples were even easier for Europeans to defeat.

The key to this new outward movement of Europeans was the development of ocean-going sailing ships that could steer their course out of reach of land by means of the magnetic compass, a Chinese invention brought to Europe by the Mongol invasions. Improvements to the mariner’s astrolabe, used alongside the cross-staff and the quadrant, (17) helped determine latitude and the accurate mapping of the stars with the aid of observatories such as that established by Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal led to navigational almanacs and charts being provided for use on board ship. (18)

Contrary to a widespread popular myth, most Europeans at the time of Columbus did not generally believe the Earth was flat. Even the early eighth century the Venerable Bede in England had described the Earth in his influential and much-copied treatise *The Reckoning of Time*, that the Earth was round ('not merely circular like a shield [or] spread out like a wheel, but more like a ball’). Ancient Greek astronomers like Ptolemy were also widely known in the 15th century. Columbus was not unusual in his belief, essential to long-distance oceanic navigation, that the Earth was spherical; it’s worth noting perhaps that the Chinese by contrast, for all their skill in sailing, manifested in Zheng-He’s large-scale naval expeditions across the Indian Ocean in the early 15th century, continued to believe that the Earth was flat until convinced otherwise by the Jesuits. (19)

The possession of writing, enabling the preservation and diffusion of such knowledge, was another advantage the Europeans possessed over Native Americans. Crucially, too, the rapidly depopulating Americas became favoured objects of settlement for land-hungry Europeans, above all where the climate was suitable, not so much in Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia, as in Mexico and Peru, where impoverished nobles could carve out large estates and employ the local people to work them. The object here was economic too, as the Europeans set up plantations to produce much-desired goods such as sugar, or mines to produce silver and gold. (20) Where natives would not work for them on the plantations, as in Brazil or the West Indies or the southern part of North America, they imported slaves from Africa. (21) The result of all this was the re-creation of something like European society in the Americas, with a landowning and partly urbanized upper class in charge, and the place of European peasant and landless labourers taken by native Americans or imported African slaves. This was particularly the case in Brazil, under Portuguese control after the Treaty of Tordesillas brokered by the Pope in 1494. (22) All these colonies were run on effectively the same lines as in Spain or Portugal: Spanish America simply became another kingdom to go along with the several, such as Castile, Aragon and so on, ruled by the Spanish monarch, while Brazil was treated as a Portuguese province like any other.

Still, most of the administrations in the South and Central American colonies had to deal with a majority population of non-Europeans. The Spanish administration tried to be relatively enlightened, aiming to assimilate the natives into European Christian religion and European ways, treating them as formal equals to Spaniards and encouraging them to live in towns. At the same time, feudal labour services survived in parts of Spain, so while the administration outlawed the enslavement of native Americans, it also provided for forced labour by the natives for the settlers, underlining it with debt slavery, especially in the mines of Peru, where native Americans were pushed into indebtedness then obliged to labour to pay the money off. The mines of Potosí were notorious for this kind of exploitation, which was less common of course in areas where Spanish settlement was less dense and the drive to extract mineral wealth less intensive. (23)

And the wealth Spain gained from here colonies was immense, as English privateers like Sir Francis Drake knew all too well. With heavy taxation and a monopoly of trade in items like tobacco imposed by the Spanish, the profits made for Spain were very considerable. In Brazil, too, the discovery of gold and diamonds at the end of the 17th century led to increased profits for the colony, which provided as much revenue to the Portuguese Crown as the whole of urban Portugal, though enough latitude was left to the colonists in the government of their own affairs to ensure that resentment against the Crown was kept to a minimum; (24) in addition, Portuguese maritime power was relatively weak by the 18th century, forcing the Crown to allow the British and Dutch to conduct most of Brazil’s overseas trade. So overall, Portuguese colonists were not particularly discontented with their ties with the mother country.

Things were very different in Spanish America. Pressure from colonists in the 18th century began to force the Spanish government to relax its tight monopolistic controls on trade and ease back on its heavy taxation of the colonies in the 18th century. Soon it was possible for British ships to obtain trading licenses; many did not bother but traded illicitly. Spanish American ports and plantations began to prosper, with one estimate concluding that Spanish colonial trade increased between 1778 and 1788 by no less than 700 per cent, allowing seaports such as Buenos Aires to grow rapidly (as seen here in a plan from 1750). (25) Increased profitability only prompted the colonists to demand for complete freedom of trade with the rest of the world. Thus relationships between the colonies and the metropolis were becoming increasingly tense by the late 18th century.

The same can be said for the colonies of North America, though here the situation was in many respects rather different. Along the southern seaboard and in the Caribbean planters had settled producing sugar, cotton and other crops for Europe with mainly slave labour rather like the Portuguese colony in Brazil. These colonies were seen in London as serving a useful purpose, though neither they nor any others produced the kind of wealth that was being obtained from South America. Further north, the colonies had no function other than settlement, beginning of course with the Pilgrim Fathers in the 17th century, seen here departing from England in a somewhat romanticized painting by Cope from 1756. (26) Their temperate climate made them attractive to emigrants from England, Scotland, Ireland and elsewhere in Europe, and by mid-century there were about two and a half million settlers in British North America. The North American colonies as a whole were ruled in a variety of ways, reflecting their piecemeal creation, but a number of them were chartered colonies and so possessed the same kind of autonomy as chartered towns in England, with elected officials and legislatures which used their financial powers to increased colonial autonomy, including in the ‘royal’ colonies ruled by governors.

There was no single ministry or office in London to deal with the colonies: each department dealt with them as it saw fit. This meant in practice that London never developed a consistent policy towards them and played only a minor role in their governance, interfering in them only from time to time and often in contradictory ways. Westminster legislation did not apply to the colonies, which thus escaped for example the imposition of laws banning Catholics and Dissenters from holding office – another attraction in the eyes of potential emigrants.

Economic and trade policy was an exception to these rules, however. 17th-century Navigation Acts banned foreign ships from entering colonial ports. All trade had to be in British ships with British sailors and all goods had to be carried in the first instance to British ports. The British also restricted any industrial or agricultural production that might compete with their own, so that for example exports of wool were banned, and from 1750 new iron and steel mills were prohibited. The 1732 Hat Act even forbade the export of hats from one colony to another, and enforced English standards and apprenticeship regulations so that for example slaves could not be used in the production of hats and supposedly inferior headgear like beaver pelts could not be produced. Thus beaver pelts often traded from Native Americans, (27) had in law at least to be exported to Britain for hatmaking, and Americans had to buy British hats, which were generally much more expensive. As Edmund Burke put it, the colonies were in a ‘state of commercial servitude and civil liberty’.

Until 1763 the colonies were too weak and disunited to mount any effective opposition to these controls, even had they wished to. However, by this date they were coming into increasing conflict with the French empire in North America, which was expanding at a similar rate. (28) Here too, chartered companies set up trading posts and plantations in the 17th century, running into economic difficulties that brought the French monarchy in, so that by the early 1800s the Crown ruled them with the same absolutist autocracy as it did France itself. Unlike Madrid, however, Paris did not create a single centralized administration, leading to confusion and inefficiency. This too was a mercantilist empire that imposed tight restrictions on colonial trade, though these were relaxed after 1763 and some colonies, especially San Domingo, in the Caribbean, had more autonomy than most. The French empire was divided between slave-owning plantations, mainly in the Caribbean, and trading stations in the far north, especially in Canada, though in some areas, notably Quebec, substantial numbers of European migrants had settled too.

Things changed in 1763 because the Anglo-French wars that had begun in 1741 came to a negotiated peace in this year, with victory going to the British, who had already conquered a large part of the French territory including famously of course Quebec, captured by General Wolfe at the cost of his own life in 1759, depicted here in the American artist Benjamin West’s painting from 7 years later (29); now the rest of an empire that had once stretched from Hudson’s Bay to the Gulf of Mexico was taken over by the British too, with the exception of Louisiana and parts of the Dakotas, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Nebraska, north Texas and some other territories in Iowa and the mid-west, which were bought by Thomas Jefferson for the USA in 1803, doubling its territory. Napoleon, on completing the sale, commented: ‘"This accession of territory affirms forever the power of the United States, and I have given England a maritime rival who sooner or later will humble her pride.’ (30)

The emergence of the USA as a potential rival to Britain was in fact the first stage in the collapse of the European empires in North America. While the French wars were going on, the colonists were willing to accept the presence of large numbers of British troops and the imposition of central authority over the colonies, since they were not prepared to raise and deploy home-grown militias to do the job. In 1763 however they expected things to go back to the status of relative autonomy they had enjoyed before. But the British thought otherwise. To begin with, the French still had extensive possessions on the Continent that were seen as posing a continuing threat. And the removal of French forts from the western border of British settlement opened the way for a new wave of westward migration that led the British to regard the continued presence of a large army as necessary in order to defend the settlers against Native American attacks, which began almost immediately with Pontiac’s rising in May 1763. (31)

In order to pay for the troops, something the colonists were unwilling to do, since they did not see the need for them, London imposed new customs duties and began enforcing them with greater rigour than before. Elected assemblies in British North America declared that only they had the right to impose taxes. The conflict escalated, accelerating the process by which Americans thought of themselves as different from the British. It focused their thought on their constitutional rights. In 1773 the Boston Tea Party, when colonists objecting to the sale of tea in America taxed in Britain threw a shipload into the harbour, (32) led to London closing Boston harbour until compensation was paid to the East India Company, radicalizing the American opposition and undermining the position of the colonial upper class over events. A colonial Congress held in Philadelphia in 1774 sealed the victory of the radicals; by 1775 Congress had raised an army; in 1776 it declared independence; in 1777 General Burgoyne lost a crucial battle at Saratoga; in 1778-80 the French, Spanish and Dutch joined forces with the Americans, disrupting British control of the sea and stopping reinforcements from being sent to the British forces; this allowed General Washington to defeat them decisively at Yorktown in 1781 – seen here in a French illustration emphasizing the role of the French fleet – (33) leading to recognition of US independence the following year. What had begun as a conservative movement against British imperial innovations ended with a radical statement of popular sovereignty and constitutional rights that was bound to have an effect on colonial settlements elsewhere.

The power of the ideas of equality and political rights also found powerful expression in the growth of the anti-slavery movement in the late 18th century, which expressed both Enlightenment beliefs in the dignity of the individual Evangelical doctrine about the equality of human souls before God. The first British anti-slavery society was founded in 1787 and its exposure of the maltreatment of slaves en route to the Americas (34) led to the outlawing of the slave trade 20 years later. The French Revolution with its principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, declared the abolition of slavery in French colonies in 1794, and even before this, a major slave uprising had taken place in Haiti/Santo Domingo, where 450,000 slaves were owned and controlled by around 32,000 colonists and 24,000 mulattoes. The ideas of the Revolution inspired mulattoes then slaves to rise up for equal rights, while the war and British naval power cut the island off from France.

These events brought the freed slave Toussaint L’Ouverture, (35) an able military commander, to power. ‘Brothers and friends,’ he told his followers in 1793, ‘I am Toussaint Louverture; perhaps my name has made itself known to you. I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in St Domingue.’ eventually the rebellion was defeated by troops sent by Napoleon during the peace of Amiens in 1802-3. They restored slavery and took Toussaint to prison in France, where he died of pneumonia shortly afterwards. ‘In overthrowing me’, he said, ‘you have cut down in Saint Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty; it will spring up again from the roots, for they are many and they are deep.’ And indeed the French troops sent to enforce Napoleon’s will mostly died of yellow fever, the survivors being taken off the island in a British ship, while the renewal of war with Britain in 1803 cut off the island again and allowed Toussaint’s successors to set up a republic, eventually recognized by the French as a *fait acompli* in 1825.

The power of European ideas was most obvious however in the case of Simón Bolívar, a Venezuelan landowner born into a wealthy family in 1783. As a child he was deeply affected when he was taken to witness the execution of José Chirinos, leader of an unsuccessful revolt against the Spanish; after being dragged to the gallows, Chirinos was hanged, his body beheaded and quartered and the parts exhibited in strategically placed iron cages. After military training as a cadet Bolívar was sent to Europe to complete his education, and went to live in Paris. As one of his later companions said: ‘It was truly exciting to hear the Liberator name all the beautiful girls he had known in France, with a precise recollection that does honours to his powers of memory.’

Bolívar’s ambition and sense of destiny were spurred on when he witnessed the coronation of Napoleon in Nôtre Dame. Napoleon, he enthused, was ‘the first captain ofthe world.’ Descriptions of his campaigns and ‘everything connected with him’, he wrote, ‘are for me the most agreeable reading and the most profitable; there it is that the arts of war, of politics and of government should be studied.’ (36) Back in South America, where the colonial economies had been growing fast in the late 18th century, Bolîvar found a growing movement for independence, which had effectively begun when Napoleon had occupied Spain and deposed King Ferdinand in 1808, putting his brother Joseph on the throne in his stead. The American colonies all voted to keep Ferdinand, who was thus now king by election, as it were, making the colonial elite dependent on wider popular support and introducing free popular debate and mobilization in place of rigid royal control. This fuelled the ambition of republicans like Bolívar, who sought complete freedom under a republic. As the colonies were cut off from Spain by British command of the seas after Trafalgar, nationalism grew, fuelled by the demand for freedom of trade, something that was relatively easy to implement anyway now the colonies were in effect ruling themselves. In 1814 the restoration of Ferdinand brought a completely reactionary regime back into power, and its attempt to reimpose trading monopolies and old-style royal government played into the hands of the republicans.

Using a substantial legacy of four million francs which he inherited on his twenty-first birthday, Bolívar raised a series of irregular armies from the mixed-race and native American population to defeat the royalists and establish a set of independent states corresponding to the old Spanish provinces – Venezuela, Colobmia, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru – while similar events further south had led to the creation of Chile and Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay as independent or autonomous states. He was a brilliant general; his campaigns included a dramatic march over the Andes, (37) and the crossing of major rivers like the Orinoco. (38) His legacy to the continent was a divided one. Bolívar actually wanted a confederation of states, the United States of South America as it were, and he was indeed President of the Grand Union of Colombia until his early death from tuberculosis in 1830. But the centrifugal forces in the continent were too strong, and were underpinned by the fact that he conducted a series of separate campaigns rather than a single one. The fact that he mobilized the masses, including Native Americans, deeply troubled the large landowners and elites, who took steps to protect their interests in their own regions. Bolîvar was a democrat and believed in the French Revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity; but as a fervent admirer of Napoleon who established liberty through military action, he did nothing to establish a democratic political culture in Latin America and left a legacy of military rule that was to endure for the rest of the nineteenth century and through most of the twentieth.

Bolívar was aided by circumstance. The absence of Spanish control prompted declarations of independence in Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, San Salvador and Costa Rica. Between 1811 and 1824 the Spanish empire in the Americas was destroyed. Spain had been weakened too much by the devastating Peninsular War to be able to raise enough troops to assert itself: and in any case of the 42,000 it did send between 1811 and 1819, there were only 23,000 left by 1820, the rest having succumbed to disease and desertion more than the bullets of the rebels. Spain’s fleet, destroyed at Trafalgar, was unable to blockade rebel ports or defeat the rebel fleet commanded by the radical British ex-naval officer Lord Thomas Cochrane. (39) Cochrane was a dashing frigate captain during the Napoleonic Wars whose exploits made him famous and are said to have made him the model for C. S. Forester’s fictional Captain Hornblower. Imprisoned after a financial scandal in Britain, Cochrane took up an offer from the Chilean independence leader Bernardo O’Higgins to command the rebel navy; so successful was he that he was then given command over the Brazilian fleet, and also played a major role in the liberation of Peru. Sea-power was vital to the South American independence movement, and it was British sea-power that tipped the balance.

For the British government, while remaining ostensibly neutral, turned a blind eye to men like Cochrane and their securing of supplies from Britain; it was very much in Britain’s interest to open up Latin America to free trade, and when Britain recognized the new states in 1823 the Monroe Doctrine, proclaimed by the US government, opposing any European intervention in the Americas, put an end to any further action. In 1826 Canning justified the long years of British support for Bolívar: ‘I resolved that if France had Spain, it should not be Spain with the Indies. I called the New World into existence to redress the balance of the Old.’ By this time, Brazil had also become independent from Portugal, again as a result of the Napoleonic Wars; when the French conquered Portugal in 1807 the regent Dom John, (40) acting for the Queen Maria the Mad, sailed to Rio de Janeiro and set up court there, proclaiming Brazil a full sovereign state with all the rights and privileges that went with it. This reduced Portugal to the status of a province of Brazil, especially when Dom John, becoming King after Maria’s death in 1816, decided to stay on there. Forced to return to Lisbon because of political unrest led by the liberals there in 1821, the King had to agree to mercantilist restrictions being reimposed on Brazil, which led his son Dom Pedro, now regent in Rio, to bow to Brazilian mercantile pressure and become King of an independent constitutional monarchy in Brazil in 1822. Portuguese interference was defeated by Admiral Cochrane’s fleet and the British recognized Brazilian sovereignty in 1825. The Brazilian elite celebrated with illustrations showing Native Americans offering the crown to Dom Pedro, marking independence as rooted firmly in American politics and society. (41)

The end of the European empires in the Americas was thus above all a consequence of events in Europe: the ferment of ideas generated by the French Revolution; the assertion of British sea-power in the drive to open up mercantilist-controlled areas of South America to free trade; the severing of connections between the Americas and European colonial metropoles by war; and the insistence of European states on imposing tight and in some cases new economic regulations and taxes on increasingly prosperous and autonomous American colonies.

These events changed the balance of forces between the different parts of the globe. They were not the outcome of some long-term process whereby Europe was becoming superior to other parts of the world. The pre-industrial European empires were nothing unusual in the 17th- and 18th-century world. The Chinese empire in particular still dwarfed them in size. The Ottoman Empire, though it had reached its apogee by around 1700, following the failure of the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683, still covered a huge swathe of territory fromsouth-eastern Europe through north-west Africa to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. (42) Until the 1750s Islamic states still ruled India and most of south-east Asia. In Africa large states such as Oyo or Benin controlled a diverse range of territories and peoples. But the global conflict of the era changed the balance of power between Europe and the rest of the world. Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt had undermined the hold of the Ottoman Empire on the region and threatened the Empire’s leadership of the Muslim world with its seizure of the teaching centre of the Al Azhar mosque in Cairo; a series of fundamentalist movements had posed an additional challenge to Ottoman legitimacy. The British had arrested the Mughal Emperor in India, and invaded royal palaces in Java. In China, Lord Macartney’s expedition to Beijing in 1793 (43) had inaugurated a long and increasingly problematical relationship with the European states, while the death of the Qian Long emperor in 1799 had undermined the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty more directly, as factional squabbles broke out and revolts against the corruption of the regime flared up in one province after another.

The global wars that ended in 1815 undermined the legitimacy of rulers everywhere, not just in Europe. By the time they were over, the balance between Europe and the rest of the world had shifted fundamentally. Other states across the globe had managed to increase economic production and prosperity through most of the eighteenth century, largely keeping pace with European economic development; but by 1815 they had fallen behind, under the impact of European competition. China was preoccupied with its own internal affairs, as were Russia and the United States; none of these looked for a global role in the nineteenth century, though all of them would have been capable of exercising it. France was exhausted by continuous war and the French economy, on the road to industrialization in the eighteenth century, was shattered by 1815. Along with Spain and Portugal it had lost most of its overseas empire. The British had no serious rival by 1815.

The prolonged conflicts of the period stimulated European states to reform themselves root and branch; many, indeed, had been forced to adopt some of the principles advocated by the French in order to beat Napoleon at his own game. The Kingdom of Prussia, for instance, was compelled to free the country’s serfs from the most onerous dues and obligations to which they had been subjected, to modernize its army, and to reform bureaucratic administration of the state to make it more effective. In many parts of Europe, a new efficiency in administration and the vital arts of troop recruitment and tax-gathering went hand in hand with measures to stimulate economic production, allowing entrepreneurs to accumulate wealth for themselves and their families so long as they paid their dues to the state. Military efficiency was thus linked productively to economic growth in ways that the restrictive and rapacious state economic policies of China or the Ottoman Empire did not allow. This was nowhere more truely than it was in Britain, where a highly effective military state had emerged in the course of the eighteenth century. Industrialization in Britain was given a huge stimulus by the demands of warmaking, and by 1815 steam-power was beginning to lay the foundations for a new kind of economy far more productive than anything that existed anywhere else in the world.

Above all, perhaps, it was European, and as a result of the wars, overwhelmingly British command of the seas that provided the basis for the new dominant relationship of Europe with the rest of the world after 1815. It allowed Europeans to colonise further parts of the globe, like Australia or much of Africa, where the state was weak, non-existent or less well equipped with military technology. It provided Europeans with the means to throttle rival manufacturing centres through their control of seaborne trade. And driving this expansion was a set of ideologies, given concrete expression in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and the international wars that followed it, which legitimized the conviction that European ideas and beliefs were superior to the great majority of those held by the rest of the world, except where, as in America, they had already taken hold. The assumption of European superiority in terms of power-politics and economic and technological strength over the rest of the world had been widespread before 1789; for the century after 1815, it had for the first time a recognizable basis in reality. The consequences of this were to become ever more momentous as the century progressed. At the same time, British rule everywhere depended on the co-operation of indigenous peoples, above all in what was by far the most important part of the empire after 1815, namely India. Ideologies of empire began to emerge, but as the mid-century crisis was to show, they paid far too little account of this basic fact, as I shall show in my next lecture, on 18th October.

©Professor Richard J Evans, Gresham College 2011