



The Rise and Fall of the British Empire

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It seems to me that one ought not to look at the history of the British Empire - or of any empire, for that matter - as one of a simple rise and fall. Granted, if one looked at a series of maps, if one paid attention only to the broad trajectory, that is clearly the historical theme. However, as those of you who have attended my earlier lectures this year will already realise, the history is more of a series of waves, depending on when and where: most would see the loss of the American colonies in 1783, for example, as a decline. From the 19th century, of course, British naval supremacy symbolised and supported the increasing amount of territory brought into the red parts of the map of the globe. This expansion was also symbolised and supported by the international dominance of the pound sterling as the currency of choice and of London as the financial centre of the world. Both of these supports began to fall away in 1914, and whilst the empire increased as a result of the First World War - this is when Great Britain acquired Palestine - there began the final slow, withdrawing roar. We are all familiar with the general story of the post-1945 withdrawal, but I want tonight to put it in context by giving it some sort of unified history.

Empires can be land-based or seaborne, formal or informal. Formal empire requires political and, at least by implication, military control; informal empire normally refers to economic predominance. For many decades and in many places, Great Britain maintained an informal empire, with one of the best examples being large parts of South America in the nineteenth century, especially in Argentina. A notable factor which set the British Empire apart from other empires was the large number of settler colonies. The first was Ireland, from the Anglo-Normans to the Elizabethans and the planting of the Scots in Ulster. Ireland, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and Kenya were all settler colonies. Numbers of white settlers went out with the intention of remaining, rather than to make their fortune and return to Great Britain. I cannot think of any other European empires which set out to populate their colonies in the same manner and to the same extent.

One distortion which arose from the early concentration on colonising Ireland is that those looking overseas for opportunities tended to look westwards across the Atlantic, rather than to the opportunities presented by Asia or Africa. There was, in fact, much overseas commerce carried out by the merchant adventures or the great trading companies: three examples are the Muscovy Company, set up in 1555 to trade with Russia, the Levant Company, set up in 1592 to trade with Turkey, and the East India Company, set up in 1600 to trade with Asia, and destined to become the longest lasting, the richest and the most powerful of all trading companies. However, these companies normally limited themselves to trading outposts and had little desire for political involvement beyond that needed to defend their economic and trading positions. It was to that part of the world which was yet empty of population, in European terms, and free of Spanish or French involvement that the English turned.

If we look back to the 16th century, when England - or some Englishmen - first began to think about planting colonies, one of the first interesting points is that the term 'empire' had a very different meaning from what it has today. During the 16th century, England was sometimes described as an empire, but what that meant was that England and its monarchs had, for centuries, been independent from the domination of other powers, and this included the Pope - Henry VIII, for example, was keen on its use after his break with Rome. In other words, 'empire' referred to isolation, as it were, rather than to dominion over other lands [Canny]. The term 'Britain' or 'Great Britain' arose from the Union of the Crowns in 1603, when the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland, plus the principality of Wales, came together as one; it was

King James VI and I who came up with the name, based on the old Britannia, and phrases such as 'the Empire of Great Britaine' were used. However, the term still did not necessarily mean a territorial empire.

PICTURE 2: JOHN DEE - Yet, there had been men during the 16th century who urged this territorial expansion, and called it by its modern name. It was John Dee, a pioneer of the mathematics of navigation, and astrologer to Queen Mary (a subject in which he had tutored the young Princess Elizabeth), who invented the phrase PICTURE 3: TEXT - 'Brytish Impire', and sketched out the English claim to an empire of the North Atlantic. PICTURE 4: QUEEN ELIZABETH I WITH GLOBE - He set this down in 1578 in a statement for Queen Elizabeth of 'Her Majesty's Title Royal' to the lands in question. Dee was joined by Richard Hakluyt, editor of volumes of reports on explorations by Englishmen. Hakluyt's 'Discourse on Western Planting' - these colonies were called plantations - was issued in 1584, and summed up the arguments and justifications for the colonisation of America. First of all, it would increase the possibilities for trading; it would also increase naval and military resources, such as timber. Colonies would help to defend Great Britain against the Spanish and French, because they would provide bases from which England could attack their shipping. Colonies in America would provide a destination for England's surplus population, as well as give these 'lustie youths' increased chances to make something of themselves. And finally, America would provide a religious refuge for those fleeing from the ungodly Catholic powers, Spain and France. At this point, however, these arguments made little lasting impact on Queen Elizabeth or on much of the political class, who were focused on the threats from Europe, but others were more responsive.

Men from Bristol led by John Cabot had discovered North America in 1497, PICTURE 5: SIR HUMFREY GILBERT - but it was not until 1583 that Sir Humfrey Gilbert led the first serious attempt to colonise North America. Gilbert was one of a number of ambitious and rapacious Elizabethans, a veteran of the colonisation of Ireland, who burned to acquire land and treasure for themselves and for England. Because the southern parts of the New World were entirely locked up by Spain, Gilbert looked to the north, reaching Newfoundland seven weeks after starting out. He formally claimed 400 miles of the coast, but his crew then demanded to return to England. He finally agreed, but some miles out, 'in very foule weather, and terrible seas', his ship broke up and he was cast into the waves. Gilbert was followed by Sir Walter Raleigh, but he, too, was unsuccessful, and later died when King James ordered his execution.

PICTURE 6: JAMESTOWN IN VIRGINIA - It was in 1607 that the first relatively successful plantation or colony was established, and this was in Virginia. What drove the planters was greed, although some obeisance was made to bringing God to the natives. PICTURE 7: JOHN WINTHROP - Religion, however, was the driving force for the Puritan 'Great Migration' of the 1630s to Massachusetts; their intention was to establish a theocracy. The Quakers wanted both economic improvement and religious freedom when they established Pennsylvania, PICTURE 8: LORD BALTIMORE - as did the Catholic peer Lord Baltimore when he ensured that Maryland would be a refuge for his co-religionists. The West Indies was about sugar, whilst Newfoundland began as a fishing settlement.

A point to make is that all of these colonies were the result of private enterprise: when Cromwell's Parliament tried to claim that England should control the colonies because the state had established them, all of the colonies, whatever their religious or political sympathies, contested this claim by pointing out that whilst most Britons had remained safely at home, they and their predecessors had braved the elements and endangered their own economic resources by venturing across the wild ocean. The government became more involved when the European conflicts extended to the colonies. The Seven Years' War of 1756 to 1763 - known in the colonies as the French and Indian War - essentially began on the North American continent, where France claimed Quebec and much of the Mississippi Valley; it was as a result of this war that Great Britain gained the huge French colony of Quebec, to join with the Maritime Provinces. MAP OF THE EMPIRE IN 1763 - The government began steadily to encourage settlers to move there, in order that they might outnumber the French Catholics already resident. Even so, they did not support them but only protected them, the duty of any government.

The Seven Years' War was a watershed for the British Empire, as it was now proudly called. Parliament needed to raise taxes to pay off Britain's huge national debt and to pay for the military protection of its North American and West Indian colonies. The British government believed that the colonists should help to pay for their own protection, and Parliament for the first time imposed internal taxes on the colonies; all taxes before had been customs and excise duties. PICTURE 10: AMERICAN COLONIES - The colonists had heretofore had a role in the imposition of internal taxes, and their refusal to pay taxes on which they

had not been able to vote - no taxation without representation - and the hardening of the British position, encouraged the evolution of the conflict into one over parliamentary supremacy, and the consequent outbreak of war. The outcome of the American Revolution, or War for American Independence, was not so much an American victory as a British inability to maintain control. Britain was, at the same time, fighting France, Spain and the Netherlands, on land and sea, and her resources were needed more urgently elsewhere. The loss of thirteen of her American colonies was a profound economic loss as well as a great blow to her prestige. It brought to an end what historians call the First British Empire.

PICTURE 11: MUGHAL EMPIRE - But by 1783, Great Britain had interests elsewhere, particularly in India, which in due course replaced the American colonies as the jewel in the crown. From 1526 until the British took hold, the territory of India was dominated by the Mughal Empire, although 'India' as such did not exist: rather, the Empire was split up into what were effectively regions, such as Bengal, each of which was ruled by a subordinate ruler. PICTURE 12: EAST INDIA COMPANY - Thus when the East India Company began establishing trade links on the sub-continent, it did so primarily with individual rulers. From the beginning of the 17th century, it held a monopoly of English trade east of the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa; by the end of the 17th century, its most important settlements were on the coast of India. Calcutta in Bengal had been largely founded by the British; by the 1720s, Bengal was very rich.

From the 1720s, the French East India Company also traded on a considerable scale in Asia, with their headquarters in Pondicherry, close to Madras. For forty years, conflict between the two trading companies often broke out, until the French were beaten in battle in 1760 and withdrew in 1761 - two years before their defeat in Quebec on the Plains of Abraham. Shortly before this, however, conflict between the Company and the ruler of Bengal exploded into violence: the Nawab of Bengal feared that he was losing control of his country to the British. At the Battle of Plassey in June 1757, the British defeated the Bengali army - or rather, they bribed their way to victory - and put their own candidate on the throne. This did not serve for very long - the new ruler refused to grant the Company what it wished - and he was deposed in favour of yet another ruler. Finally, in 1765, the British demanded the diwani, or right to rule, from the Mughal Emperor. PICTURE 13: MAP OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY IN INDIA IN 1765 - Therefore, by 1765, the East India Company became the outright ruler of the whole of Bengal, as well as of other smaller territories: in short, it became an Indian territorial power. There was now a second British Empire.

When the British political class began to realise that the East India Company's activities were going beyond commerce to conquest, there was increasing unease. If it was primarily a company, why was it collecting taxes, why was it now a political ruler? It seemed obvious that the resources devoted to the Company's military forces would be better devoted to expanding commercial links; furthermore, there was an increasing stench of greed and corruption, which many feared threatened British liberties and virtues; thus, was the Company the appropriate vehicle for British commercial activity in India? A monopoly no longer sat well with many people. Governmental investigations into Company affairs ended in 1813 by the British government assuming some responsibility for the Indian Empire.

PICTURE 14: MAP OF THE EMPIRE IN 1815 - The next several decades saw an imposition of despotism, a terrible economic depression, and the displacement of Indians from leading offices of wealth and power. Matters came to a head in 1857 with the Great Rebellion, which the British called the Indian Mutiny, essentially the revolt of the Bengal Army. This rebellion or civil war was a turning point. In May 1858, the British exiled the Mughal Emperor to Burma, which they also controlled, thus formally ending the Mughal Empire. The East India Company was also abolished, and the British government established direct rule under the British Crown. Over the following decades, the British relationship with India developed in different ways. PICTURE 15: THE VICEROY LORD CURZON AND HIS WIFE AT A DURBAR - The panoply of British power developed, whilst at the same time, barriers went up against the Indians, even those loyal and educated Indians of rank. Because of the Mutiny, British attitudes shifted from relative openness to dislike and distrust, and even racial xenophobia. The strict subordination to the British of both Indians and mixed race was strongly enforced by the memsahibs. More positively, however, there was a gradual development of opportunities for Indians to take part in government. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 with the object of obtaining a greater share in government for educated Indians, but it had relatively little influence until after the First World War.

PICTURE 16: LORD MINTO - As it happened, the drive for political change came from the British themselves, in particular from Liberal Party politicians. The Government of India Act of 1909 gave Indians limited political rights and responsibilities; it also granted separate electorates and communal representation for Muslims and Indians, perhaps an unwise step. The claims by Indians for self-government were strengthened by their participation in the First World War, when India provided well over

a million soldiers as well as a substantial financial contribution; PICTURE 17: IMPERIAL WAR CABINET - by 1917, India had native representation in the Imperial War Cabinet. This crucial contribution, and the repeated statements by Western allies that the war was being fought for democracy and the rights of nations, raised Indian aspirations for greater self-government. The Government of India Act of 1919 extended the franchise and gave increased authority to centre and provincial legislative councils, but the viceroy remained responsible to London, not to an Indian-based legislative body.

The series of British negotiations with the representatives of Indian political pressure groups had not been driven by the desire to one day give India her independence: rather, it was to find some way to keep her within the Empire and under some control. In 1910, roughly half of the British Army was stationed in India, whilst the Indian Army itself numbered a quarter of a million men, largely officered by the British and with a huge reservoir of manpower at its back; basically, the Indian Army was the imperial army and police force, as well as serving with valour in the Great War. As a military training ground, India had every sort of climate and terrain. In economic terms, by 1913 she accounted for nearly 10% of British trade and was by far the UK's most important customer. India remained the most important part of the Empire. The British government strove to meet Indian desires, but it saw the 1919 Act as embodying its maximum concessions, which did not satisfy Indian political demands. PICTURE 18: MASSACRE AT AMRITSAR - There was opposition, which the British repressed, including the horrific massacre at Amritsar, with General Reginald Dyer thereafter receiving promotion. PICTURE 19: MAHATMA GANDHI - The massacre provided very great impetus for the movement for freedom and paved the way for Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920 and 1921. Gandhi was a member of the Congress Party, and he led it in a general campaign of nonviolent non-cooperation during the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, in 1935, another Government of India Act was passed, which essentially gave India home rule. The main problem was whether or not there would continue to be separate electorates: the Congress party, which was primarily Hindu, insisted on a unified electorate, whilst the Muslim League insisted on the continuation of separate electorates, arguing that Muslims and Hindus were two separate nations. The Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, decided that the system of separate electorates at both provincial and central levels would continue.

At the outset of the Second World War, Britain made India a belligerent without consulting Indian elected councils. This angered Indian officials, and led Congress to declare that India would not support the war effort until it had been granted complete independence. Agreement was therefore reached between them that India would be granted full independence once the Axis powers were defeated, if India gave her full co-operation during the war. In the winter of 1945-46, the British worked with Congress and the Muslim League to devise a governmental structure for the soon-to-be independent state. However, Congress and the League could not agree, and by mid-August 1946 a frenzy of rioting ensued between Hindus and Muslims. PICTURE 20: MAP OF THE PARTITION - In July 1947, Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act, which set a deadline of midnight on August 14-15 for 'demarcation of the dominions of India' into India and East and West Pakistan. As a result of the Partition, 10 million Indians fled their homes to seek sanctuary across the line, and the Indian Empire became two, and soon three, states.

After 1783 and the loss of the American colonies, India increasingly became, and remained, the major imperial concern of the British, who saw significant parts of the Empire, as well as non-imperial territories, in geographical relation to India. PICTURE 21: MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA - The 19th century 'Great Game' with Russia, which extended from Constantinople on the Bosphorus to India, taking in Egypt, Turkey, other Arab lands, Persia and the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia and North-West India, was primarily about India, although it also had ramifications in China. Essentially, as the Russian Empire moved steadily east, sometimes ahead and sometimes behind the construction of the Siberian Railway and its branches, the British feared that their goal was India. The Russians hoped so too, or at least to pick it up on their way to absorbing great chunks of China. They threatened Persia, with its border with India; they threatened Afghanistan, which was able to defend itself, against both the Russians and the British; and they threatened Tibet. In 1907, a Russia weakened by defeat in the Russo-Japanese War sat down to negotiate with Great Britain about their outstanding imperial conflicts. Persia ended up being parcelled into Russian and British spheres of interest; Russia agreed that Britain had a special interest in Afghanistan, whilst Britain agreed not to use this interest in a manner threatening to Russia; and they agreed that Tibet would be a neutral buffer state. However, the Agreement still gave Russia, whose power was now on the increase, much scope for expansion in Asia, and Britain could do little to halt it. However, India was no longer threatened by the Russian Empire, which had turned its attention primarily to China.

The British Empire in China was of a different sort from that in India or Africa: it was an 'informal empire',

not an 'empire of rule'. Great Britain was interested in trade, not in political control. One characteristic was that the region retained nominal independence, whilst succumbing to foreign influence; with the help of local collaborators, Britain was able to enjoy power without the costs of responsibility. She had influence from favourable commercial agreements with ostensibly sovereign states; she also had preponderant influence in strategically vital territories, gained from diplomatic pressure and the appointment of key advisers. However, behind these financial and commercial links always lurked the threat of force, of 'gunboat diplomacy', provided by the Royal Navy. It was gunboat diplomacy which destroyed the restrictions which had shackled British trade and opened up China to foreigners. But the foreigners were not only the British, and Britain soon found that she had to defend her position from other Powers - who did want to impose an empire of rule - as well as from the Chinese themselves.

PICTURE 22: CHINA IN 1842 - At the beginning of the 19th century, China was virtually closed to foreigners. The East India Company had developed trading links with China in the 18th century, but all trade was supervised by the Chinese and the British were confined to a small enclave around the port of Canton or of Macao. The main British imports were silk and, overwhelmingly, tea, which was fast becoming the British national drink. But - how to pay for the tea, given that the Chinese wanted virtually nothing from Britain? The answer was opium. From 1773, there was a highly lucrative export of Bengali opium; by the mid-1830s, over one-half of the tea exported to Great Britain was being paid for by British merchants with opium bought in Calcutta. PICTURE 23: OPIUM WAR - It was the attempt of the Chinese Government to stamp out the trade in opium which opened up the country to foreign incursions, since the British reaction was to send in the gunboats. The outcome of the 1840-1842 Opium War was the Treaty of Nanking, the first of what the Chinese were to call the 'Unequal Treaties'. PICTURE 24: HONG KONG IN 1848 - First of all, China ceded the island of Hong Kong to Britain in perpetuity, and this rapidly became one of Britain's most important commercial bases in Asia; PICTURE 25: THE TREATY PORTS - five Chinese port cities were opened to foreigners for residence as well as trade (the number of these increased between 1842 and 1860); and British officials would henceforth communicate with the Chinese on terms of equality, rather than being treated as barbarians beneath their notice.

For the remainder of the century, there were repeated conflicts with the Chinese, the most dangerous being the Boxer Rebellion in the summer of 1900 against all of the Powers. PICTURE 26: THE BRITISH LEGATION BEING ATTACKED; PICTURE 27: THE AMERICAN MARINES - In 1886, Britain completed the takeover of Burma, PICTURE 28: BURMA - which she had begun in the early 19th century as she advanced from India; this acquisition protected the approaches to both India and China. Equally sporadically, she incorporated the Malayan mainland and Singapore, and portions of Borneo, into her political and economic networks. This period also saw increasing competition with the other Powers, particularly with Russia and, later, Japan. In the 1870s, Japan began to join the other Powers in encroaching on Chinese territory, an advance which enraged Russia, and the two of them came increasingly close to conflict. In February 1904, Japan launched an attack on the Russian concession of Port Arthur; in due course, they destroyed the Russian Pacific Fleet. Russia then sent the Baltic Fleet to the Pacific, but it was met by a Japanese fleet and was also destroyed. On land the Russians fared little better, being defeated in a series of battles.

PICTURE 29: MAP OF THE JAPANESE EMPIRE AFTER THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR OF 1904-5 - Japan's defeat of Russia in 1904 had profound consequences. For one thing, it signalled the end of Russian expansion in East Asia, and she turned her attention back to Europe. But this had an important result for Great Britain as well. From the beginning of her activities in China, her most threatening competitor had been Russia. This was now changed, and it was Japan who increasingly posed the greatest threat to British interests in China. After 1916, China descended into political turmoil and disintegrated into semi-autonomous territories run by warlords. There was no central authority. The rising nationalism of the Chinese added another factor, since it had no coherent doctrine and no unified political movement. British expatriates were sometimes hysterical about this nationalism, but the British government tried cautious sympathy and negotiations - pointless, as they offered no concessions. The British position during the 1930s drifted gently downhill as the Japanese pressure grew stronger. The Japanese sweep down the Chinese coast in the second half of 1937, the beginning of the undeclared Sino-Japanese War, presaged the impending end of the British informal empire. Because of their non-combatant status, their commercial centres of Hong Kong and Shanghai were untouched, and British business did very well for a year or two. But by 1940, Japan and Britain seemed on the brink of war because of Britain's harbouring of Chinese refugees and hosting a number of Chinese government agencies in Hong Kong. Yet, it was not until 8 December 1941 that the long-awaited attack by Japan on Hong Kong came, following the attack on

Pearl Harbour; the colony surrendered on Christmas Day. PICTURE 30: JAPANESE CONTROL OF SHANGHAI - On the same day, the Japanese invaded the International Settlement at Shanghai and the British Concession at Tiensin. Both enclaves ceased to exist and all British nationals were interned. Thus, after almost precisely a century, the informal British empire in China came to a decisive and unmistakable end. After the war, the British retrieved Hong Kong and the New Territories, which they had leased in 1898 for ninety-nine years, but somehow, it was just not the same.

There was another part of Asia, another part of the Empire, which was not lost, and this was Australia. PICTURE 31: CAPTAIN JAMES COOK - In 1770, Captain James Cook sailed up the coast of Australia on the first of his great voyages of exploration into the Pacific, visiting what was to be called Botany Bay, and ascertaining that it might support European settlers. Eighteen years later, a colony was established.

PICTURE 32: THE 'FIRST FLEET' 1788 - After a prodigious journey round the Cape of Good Hope and across the Indian Ocean, a fleet of eleven vessels containing 736 convicted criminals, a Governor and some officials, and an escort of marines founded in 1788 a British colony on the eastern coast of Australia in what later became New South Wales. This was the first European settlement of any kind in Australasia. It was an almost foolhardy move, given that the British government had no real knowledge as to what conditions would be like. Why did they go to Australia? Was it because they wanted to establish a base in the Pacific? Did they see commercial possibilities? The traditional explanation is that New South Wales was colonised primarily to provide a convict settlement is a plausible one. Transportation had for decades been an important part of the British penal system; their destination had been colonial America, but with the loss of the American colonies after the revolution, that option had disappeared. Very large numbers of convicts had accumulated in Britain, and they had to go somewhere.

Once the new colony was established, the British continued to send convicts, some 160,000 by 1852. However, from the landing of the 'First Fleet', non-convict settlers also went, and their numbers increased as the opportunities for the immigrant became more and more apparent. In 1826, settlement began in Western Australia, and in 1834 in Victoria. PICTURE 33: MAP OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA 1901 - The slow emergence of six colonies over the century resulted in their consolidation in the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. Some whites from NSW had crossed into New Zealand to use it as a base for voyages into the Pacific and to trade with the Maoris, and in 1840, the British government annexed it, an order which had to be imposed by force against the Maoris. In Australia and New Zealand, as in the Cape of Good Hope which they had taken from the Netherlands and annexed in 1806, the British established constitutional arrangements on the same principles as those in British North America: essential imperial control was to be maintained, but otherwise the white communities were to rule themselves as much as possible. This rather sums up the difference in their relationship with Britain of the settler colonies in comparison with the others. It may also account for the fact that the relationship with Australia and New Zealand remains close; in these cases, one would speak not of the decline of Empire, but of its evolution into the Commonwealth.

This is emphatically not the case with the Empire in the Middle East. Britain's 'moment in the Middle East' [Monroe] was substantially about protection: protection of the route to India and later to Australia, protection of the route to oil, and, after 1945, protection of her status as a world power. Her intention was not formal control but formal influence - in other words, an informal empire - with the desired outcome a series of friendly buffer states. However, the threat from other imperial powers, particularly France and Russia, and then Germany, encouraged Britain to extend and exercise this control. Her serious involvement began in 1875, with the purchase of 44% of the shares in the Suez Canal Company, and ended in 1956, with the débâcle of the Suez Crisis. There was then a slow dénouement, as Britain withdrew from East of Suez during the period from 1968 to 1971: the desire to remain had gone.

The Suez Canal, which was built by the French, was opened in November 1869. PICTURE 34: THE FIRST VESSELS THROUGH THE SUEZ CANAL - In October 1874, the opportunity arose of securing a large block of shares in the Suez Canal Company. The Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, was an imperialist who had a realistic view of the strategic importance of Egypt and the Canal; he moved quickly and, with the financial aid of the Rothschilds, he bought the shares just hours before the French Government tried to do the same. It was the need to protect the Canal that provoked the British government into invading Egypt in 1882 and assuming predominate financial and political influence. As the 19th century drew to a close, Britain's position was subject to increasingly threatening pressure from other powers. To consolidate her power and eliminate these threats as far as possible, she came to agreements with her imperial rivals to settle, inter alia, most outstanding Middle Eastern conflicts. The Anglo-French Agreement of 1904 recognised the predominant position of Britain in Egypt and of France in Algeria and Morocco, whilst the

Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907, as noted above, split Persia between the two powers. This allowed the three to form an alliance during the First World War.

As a result of this war, Britain's Empire grew by the acquisition of substantial territory in the Middle East. For a century, threats to India had been parried in part by a policy of keeping the Ottoman Empire together and using Turkish Arabia, Persia and Afghanistan as a shield against Russia. These were countries which Britain did not herself particularly want to occupy, but which she could not afford to have occupied by other countries. With Turkey's entry into the war as an ally of Germany, Britain's approach to the Middle East changed, since Arabia was now enemy country. The Eastern Mediterranean needed to be secured, and military reinforcements were sent to Egypt and a protectorate declared. Cyprus, a leasehold since 1878, was annexed on the day that Britain went to war with Turkey. There was also a new thrust, and this was into Mesopotamia, to prevent it from attack by the Turks or penetration by German agents, and to safeguard the sources of oil. After a number of reverses, Turkey surrendered and thereby lost her entire Middle Eastern territory.

PICTURE 35: MAP OF THE MANDATES - At the Peace Conference in 1919, it was split between Britain and France: Britain received the Mandates for Iraq, Trans-Jordan, and Palestine, whilst France received Syria and the Lebanon. The Empire was now at its greatest extent: it controlled 25% of the globe and 20% of its population. However, Palestine immediately became a problem, largely because of competing claims on the territory: there was the indigenous Palestine population, and there were the incoming Jews, to whom the British Government had promised the establishment of a national home in Palestine. The British tried to balance the claims of both populations, but as war drew closer, this became more and more difficult.

World War II ended with Britain apparently still dominant in the Middle East. Cyrenaica and Tripolitania had been added in 1943 to the other captured Italian ex-colonies, Somalia and Eritrea, as part of the informal empire. But over the succeeding decade or so, she suffered one defeat after another. First of all came Palestine, from which the US more or less forced Britain to withdraw, and she resigned the Mandate in May 1948. PICTURE 36: ISRAELI CELEBRATIONS - Note that this was the only imperial territory after the American Revolution from which Britain was forced out. The state of Israel was then declared. In 1951, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company lost control of Persian oil, and, after a joint MI6/CIA coup to remove the prime minister and restore the Shah, Britain resigned dominant influence in Iran to the US. However, the final and most cataclysmic end of Empire in the Middle East was the Suez Crisis. PICTURE 37: NASSER - As a reaction to the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Nasser, the Egyptian leader, PICTURE 38: PORT SAID AFTER ANGLO-FRENCH ATTACKS - the British, French and Israelis invaded to secure the Canal and the Canal Zone. PICTURE 39: EISENHOWER AND DULLES DISCUSSING SUEZ - Eisenhower, the American President, was intensely furious, and sanctions against Britain were put into place: her loss of oil was not made up, and the pound, which was plummeting, received no American support. Furthermore, the American Sixth Fleet was moved into a menacing position, although no one expected anything to happen there. The Americans feared that this imperial assault would drive the Arab peoples closer to the Soviet Union; furthermore, it took place just before an American presidential election, and during the Hungarian Uprising, with the resulting Soviet invasion of Hungary. Suez was a profound turning-point. The long-term result was an accelerating withdrawal from the remainder of the Empire and a disinclination to become involved abroad. Certainly, it was now clear that the UK could not involve itself in any foreign policy which required the use of force without at least the acquiescence of the US.

PICTURE 40: AFRICA ABOUT 1850 - And finally, there is Africa. For Britain, the colonial drive here was as much defensive as offensive: most politicians and officials wished for no political responsibility for a territory, unless and until some other power wanted it. Exploration and occupation were led by those on the ground, and it took quite a long time for the British government to become interested in Africa. Sierra Leone had been founded by the British in 1787 as a home for freed slaves, but Africa was a matter for the private sector, not the government. The two groups who maintained a high level of interest were explorers and missionaries, and it was the stories of the explorers which really stimulated interest in Africa.

PICTURE 41: MAP OF WEST AFRICA - If the traditional interest in Egypt was based on strategic considerations, the traditional interest in West Africa had always been trade: Britain sent manufactured goods to West Africa in exchange for slaves, which were shipped to the West Indies in exchange for sugar and other tropical goods, which were shipped back to Britain. After 1807, with the end of the slave trade, palm oil took the place of slaves. In West Africa during the 1870s and the 1880s, the competition came

from France. In East Africa, it was Germany. In South Africa, it was the Boers, although in this case, the British expanded from Cape Colony into the Boer states. Fundamentally, by the 1880s, countries were grabbing land in Africa wherever they could, leading to the so-called Scramble for Africa. There were new countries, Italy and Germany, and older ones such as Belgium, who believed overwhelmingly that they had to have colonies. Great Powers, like Britain and France, had colonies, and thus so should any state which presumed to be a Great Power. Most of the world outside of Africa had already been absorbed by other empires, so that left this final continent. In many cases, land was grabbed not because of its intrinsic worth, but to keep someone else from controlling it. PICTURE 42: THE AFRICAN CONTINENT IN 1910 - By the turn of the century, Liberia and Abyssinia were the only African countries which remained independent. The British controlled most of a highway of land from the Cape to Cairo, and would do so after 1918, when she took over Tanganyika; she had her colonies on the west coast, pre-eminently Nigeria, Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast; and she had Egypt and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

PICTURE 43: THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN 1939 - For most of the period between the two world wars, British defence policy was focused on the Empire; what World War II then made clear was that in military terms, it was simply a burden. From the early Cold War period, in any case, Britain's attention was concentrated on Europe, firstly by NATO and later by the desire to join the EEC. NATO was vital to Britain's security against the Soviet and associated threats. A major reason for the growing desire to join the EEC was a fundamental economic change: whilst from the end of World War I until the mid-1950s, the Empire as a whole was by far Britain's main trading partner, the position then declined substantially. In short, it became more and more clear that in terms of national power and wealth, the colonial empire and the Commonwealth could no longer provide Great Britain with the military and economic security she required.

But there were other reasons. The prime one was imperial overstretch. Great Britain simply could not hold what she had. Governments were trying to change life in Britain, and all of the financial and human resources were required for that - and any left over had to go into her commitments to NATO and her other foreign policy responsibilities. In the Empire itself, the dependent peoples were making it increasingly clear that they wanted nothing less than their independence: the example of the Japanese defeating the Western Powers had been searing, and nationalism was a potent force. For decades, Britain had been murmuring something about trusteeship: her imperial responsibilities were to guide and hover protectively over these peoples until they were ready for self-government, although no one could state just when they would be ready. This approach was no longer acceptable, and Britain had to decide whether to resist or resign. The will to empire had never been one based solely on a cost-benefit analysis: many people took great pride in the Empire, and saw it as an essential part of Britain's identity and as defining her position in the world. By the 1960s, there was a reversion to the idealism of the mid-19th century, that the British, through their Empire, were spreading freedom and improvement across the world [Marshall]. But by this period, Britain had not the resources - Suez had made this manifestly clear - and, increasingly, she had not the will to resist the calls of the colonies for freedom. She would withdraw from the Empire, leaving behind her dozens of independent states.

This mostly took place in groups. By the Statute of Westminster of 1931, the Dominions essentially became independent. India and Pakistan gained their independence in 1947, although at great cost, followed in 1948 by Burma and Ceylon, later to be called Sri Lanka. The Gold Coast became independent as Ghana in 1957, followed in the period from 1960 to 1968 by the African colonies: Nigeria, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Botswana, Zambia, Gambia, Lesotho, and Swaziland. In 1997, the lease on the New Territories in China ran out, and China re-took control; at the same time, Britain re-ceded Hong Kong to China. There was now left only about sixteen British overseas territories, ranging from Gibraltar to the Falklands to the Cayman Islands to Bermuda to the Sovereign base areas on Cyprus to the British Antarctic Territory.

Was the Empire a Good Thing? This is a question which continues to raise emotions high - some of you may have seen the journalistic squabbles over this very question during the past fortnight. That is truly an unanswerable question, since it depends on where you are and what is important. Do the ex-colonies remember the violence or the schools and medicines? Colonies inherited many institutions and structures - although some of these are no longer have the same resonance as they do in Britain - and the English language, of very great importance today. There is no doubt of the supreme value of the Empire to Great Britain: to develop from an off-shore island menaced by many greater powers to the supreme international power herself - to the possessor of the largest empire the world has ever known - was no mean feat. The habits inculcated by it, which include professional armed forces and a diplomatic corps of high quality, an ability to walk easily abroad and an openness to foreign influences which is probably unique in the modern

world, contribute to Britain's continuing international position, one which is not based on her geography nor necessarily on her wealth. But it can also encourage a nostalgia about past glories which might interfere with the reality of today's world. I do not myself particularly subscribe to that argument, but perhaps a valedictory lecture is not the place for such musings. Rather, to quote John Ebdon, if you have been, thank you for listening.

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