

## Syllabus

### HIST2258 The British Empire: Its Rise and Fall

HIST 2258 T. Th. 1.30-2.45 p.m.

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Imperialism is not something we normally associate with human progress. It has become a by-word for inhumanity and exploitation. Its cognates included conquest, drudgery, impoverishment of subject peoples, slavery, and deprivation on a grand scale. The needs, desires, hopes, and rights of subject peoples were disregarded so that the imperial metropole might profit and be enriched. Nevertheless European Empires reified imperialism into a trope that they were bringing the “benefits of Christian civilization” to “barbarous” peoples.

One of the most “successful” empires in world history was the British Empire. A question immediately arises: how did a relatively small country at the edge of Europe come to acquire the largest empire the world had seen. At its height it covered 24% of the earth’s surface. How was it built up? What sustained it? What were the political, diplomatic and military accomplishments of this empire “over which the sun never set?” Beginning with Colonial North America this course will trace the history of the empire, and the men and women who shaped it, from the acquisition of British North America to the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997.

Although one might think that Ireland was England’s first colony, invaded as it was in 1170, it is conventional to place the starting point of the British Empire (Britain as a country came into being in 1707) at the end of the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), which Winston Churchill, not without some justification, described as the First World War given the number of countries involved in that conflict. As a result of its activity Britain acquired New France, to add to its holdings in Colonial America. In that same century Britain had assimilated Bombay from the Portuguese although it had already established trade links with India and the South East Asia as early as 1601, with the foundation of the East India Company the previous year. Britain was behind Portugal and the Netherlands in trade with Asia, but it would soon establish itself as the major force in Asia, and India would become the “Jewel in the Crown” of British Imperialism. Britain would compete with other European imperial interests not only in the East but also in Africa, first with the Dutch in Southern Africa and then with the French, Portuguese, the Germans, and to a lesser extent the Spanish and Belgians, in what became by the 19<sup>th</sup> century a “scramble for Africa.”

Despite the fact that it engaged in extensive trade with South America Britain’s holdings on that continent were very small given the dominance of Spain and Portugal, and the British were forced to content themselves with tiny areas such as Guyana and the Falkland Islands (over which Britain fought a war with Argentina as recently as 1982). Its interests in the West Indies were, however, fairly extensive as it competed with France for influence in the Caribbean. British rule in North Africa was initially confined to the Sudan but by 1882 it had acquired effect control over Egypt at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. The 19<sup>th</sup> century may be regarded as the high point of British imperial expansion,

Britain was now firmly established not only in Africa and Asia but also in Australia and New Zealand, and had fought two opium wars with China, to ensure a free trade in drug supply from India to the Middle Kingdom.

The British would continue to add territories in the Pacific to its empire taking islands in areas such as Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. This was to add to its interests in Borneo and Malaya. Its only European holdings were Gibraltar, which gave it control of entry into the Mediterranean, Malta and Cyprus. This vast empire was predicated on British dominance of world trade and by the development of its enormous navy the biggest in the world until after World War I. (Britannia did indeed rule the waves.) Following that conflict Britain expanded its land holdings in the Middle East into areas such as Iraq and Persia, the Transjordan, and Palestine.

The importance of trade cannot be underestimated in relation to the empire. But were there other motivations? The idea of Britain's civilizing mission was evolved by some 19<sup>th</sup> century theorists as a means of justifying the British role in the world, as it sought to bring "cleanliness and godliness," to peoples whom it believed had neither. This also produced in some white settlers in the empire not only a sense of superiority, but attitudes of contempt for the peoples Britain ruled. The empire also spawned a vast colonial bureaucracy of administrators and civil servants in the far-flung reaches of empire, but also in London with the foundation of the Colonial Office 1768-1782. With the loss of the American Colonies the War and Colonial Office were combined, 1801-1854, it is strategically significant that the Colonies were united with War, and the second Colonial Office 1854-1966.

Although there was a great deal of attempt by British statesmen such as Benjamin Disraeli, who made Queen Victoria Empress of India in 1876, to justify and theorize about the necessity for Britain's imperial greatness, others, such as four time Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone, questioned the whole of British imperial ambitions. Gladstone's skepticism was justified in the face of the break-up of the empire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Undoubtedly weakened by the Great War (1914-18), that feebleness was almost immediately manifest by the independence of 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland, as the Irish Free State in 1922, following the War of Independence, 1919-21. Ireland then became something of a paradigm for the rest of the empire as indigenous peoples campaigned and fought for independence through the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

British imperialism penetrated to almost every corner of the world and this course will examine how that came to be. Its focus will not simply be on British evaluations of empire, and the history of white settlers but will also seek to render account of how subject peoples saw themselves and their relationship with their imperial rulers. Questions will be raised about imperial identity, both for the British and the non-white inhabitants of the empire. What was the impact of the empire on the imagination, culture and literature of the diverse areas of the world over which Britain held sway? How did Britain exploit its empire to maintain its status as a European super power? Its status as a world power was ironically based on its ability to harness and exploit its conquered peoples, and yet that very process revealed the weakness of British status in the world because when the empire began to unravel, in itself a fascinating story, British self-understanding was greatly destabilized. Its status in the world was no longer secure. From the 1940s there began a reverse "colonization" when non-whites from the empire started to settle in Britain to help underpin Britain's post-war industrial base. That narrative is also part of the imperial tale. These and cognate issues will be examined in the course of the semester.

We will read two essential books Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997*

(New York, 2010) and Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present* (New York, 2012). In addition ancillary material will be posted on Canvas.

It is expected that students will attend all classes and read all the material. Once a week there will be a period of discussion based on the reading and previous lectures. Students should come prepared to discuss their ideas. There will be four assignments: a brief quiz (10%); a brief research paper of 10 pages (30%); a midterm take home exam due (30%); and a bluebook exam (30%).

Students are reminded of Boston College's academic integrity policy which can be accessed at:  
<http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/polisci/integrity/.html>