

Part 1: Understanding interpretations of the British Empire from recent historians

Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2002)

'... there is reason to doubt that the world would have been the same or even similar in the absence of the Empire. Even if we allow for the possibility that trade ... could have been 'naturally occurring' in the past three hundred years, there remain the flows of culture and institutions ... When the British governed a country ... there were distinctive features of their own society that they tended to disseminate (spread). A list of the more important of these would run as follows:

1. The English language
2. English forms of land tenure (ownership)
3. Scottish and English banking
4. The Common Law
5. Protestantism
6. Team sports
7. The limited or 'night watchman' state
8. Representative assemblies
9. The idea of liberty (freedom)

The last of these is perhaps the most important because it remains the most distinctive feature of the Empire – the thing that sets it apart from its continental European rivals.'

Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt* (2011)

'The British understandably try to forget that their Empire was the fruit of military conquest and of brutal wars involving physical and cultural extermination. Although the Empire itself, at the start of the twenty-first century, has almost ceased to exist, there remains a ... tendency to view the imperial experience through ... rose-tinted spectacles.

... the colonial experience – for those who actually 'experienced' it – was just as horrific as the opponents of Empire had always maintained that it was, perhaps more so. New generations have been recovering tales of rebellion, repression and resistance that make nonsense of the accepted imperial version of what went on.'

Tasks:

1. Carefully read through each of the interpretations from start to finish.
2. Highlight five words from each interpretation which tell you whether it gives a positive or negative view of the British Empire.
3. Complete each of the following sentences:
'Ferguson argues that we should feel proud/ashamed of the Empire because ...'
'Gott argues that we should feel proud/ashamed of the Empire because ...'.

Should we feel proud of the British Empire?

Part 2: Using evidence to decide for yourself

Tasks:

1. Decide if each of the boxes below is a reason to feel proud of the British Empire, ashamed or it or both. Colour code them to show your choices.
2. Now number all the cards within each colour group to show which you feel are the most important reasons to feel proud or ashamed.

Many sports were spread through the British Empire, for example cricket, football, rugby and tennis.	Money poured into Britain from trade with countries like India and from the slave trade: banks, and cities like Liverpool and Bristol, became very wealthy.	The systems of law and government today in many former colonies were modeled on Britain. The British system of democracy is generally said to be fair and just.
Britons developed theories of racial supremacy to justify their role in other countries. These have created a legacy of racism.	Over 900 million people speak English in the world today, partly because it was spread through the Empire. Before the Empire it was common for there to be many regional dialects within one country.	Britain exported a lot of industrial goods to the Empire, e.g. cotton cloth to India. These countries were discouraged from developing their own secondary industry to process their own raw materials.
About 11 million Africans were sold as slaves by British merchants to plantation owners in the Americas. Some African slave traders became very wealthy through selling people they had captured to the British.	Britain today is a multi-cultural society. Having an Empire has influenced our language, food, culture and religions.	In the colonies the top jobs were often taken by the British. Local people were not allowed to have important jobs and were sometimes viewed as incapable.
India's first prime minister after independence in 1947 was called Pandit Nehru. He claimed 'The British have kept us poor. Our people toil for slave wages in British owned cotton mills'.	A massive Indian diamond, called the Koh-i-noor was taken and added to the British Royal Crown.	Today, the Commonwealth is an organisation of former British colonies which promotes business, human rights and democracy.
Disease was spread by white settlers. The aboriginal population of Australia was reduced by around 90% because of disease brought to the country by Europeans and because of forced settlement.	Britain tried to spread Christianity in its colonies. Missionaries travelled across the Empire to assist colonial people and to preach their faith.	When Britain granted independence it often left behind divided communities who have since fought wars. For example, there was a civil war between Muslims and Hindus in India in 1947 which resulted in a million deaths.
Many poor people living in Britain were able to emigrate to the colonies. For example, many Scottish highlanders suffered from economic decline in the 19 th century and were able to travel to Canada to start new lives on the land.	Britain helped development in some areas of the Empire by building railways, schools and colleges. For example, they attempted to connect Cape Town (South Africa) to Cairo (Egypt) by rail. Although the project wasn't completed, large sections are still used today.	The British were responsible for many acts of violence in the Empire. In 1857, for example, some Indian sepoys (soldiers in the British Army) were blown from cannons to punish them for refusing to fight with guns that were said to be greased with pig fat.

Part 4: What is your view of the British Empire?



Task:

Design your own Empire map which reflects your view of the British Empire. Aim to use pictures which represent the benefits and losses experienced by countries which were part of the British Empire. Someone looking at your map should be able to tell what your interpretation of the British Empire is.

Part 3: How did the Victorians view their Empire?

Imperial Federation map of the world showing the extent of the British Empire in 1886

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Tasks:

1. Label what you can see illustrated around the margins of this world map.
2. What does it tell you about how Victorians viewed their Empire?