

Overview of the British Empire

Influence of the British Empire—The influence of the British empire on the modern world is hard to overstate. It was the birthplace of modern parliamentary democracy. The industrial revolution and scientific revolution occurred largely within its domain.

During the 18th and 19th centuries Britain dominated the fields of exploration, industry, science, literature, and invention, and was master of the oceans. It revolutionized the world of international economics, trade, and banking, and - for good or evil - was a worldwide juggernaut of modernization. It produced enough great political philosophers, statesmen and military leaders to lead the entire world into the modern era. Even the United States is essentially a "spin-off" from the British Empire. The modern world is simply incomprehensible without a solid grounding in British history.

The British Empire collection includes regional histories of British colonies but also tells the story of the dramatic developments in British society during its period of world domination. It concludes with at Unit on the Great War, which brought a cataclysmic end to a century of British progress and optimism.

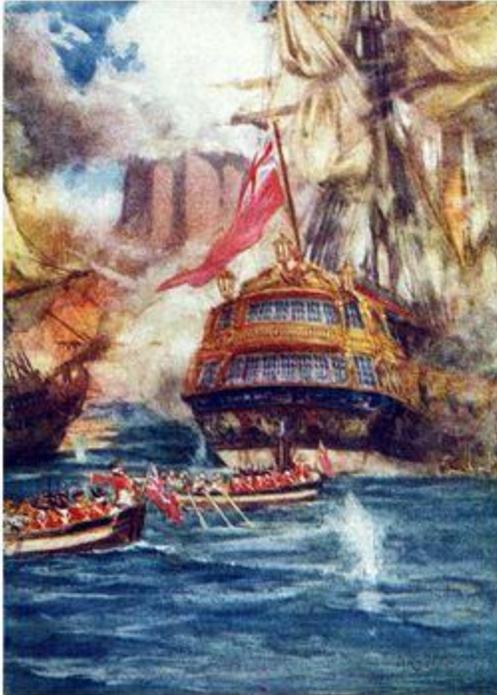
Divisions of the British Empire—In the early years of the 18th century, Scotland and England were finally united into a single nation and it is from that point that the era of the British Empire is usually dated. The **Foundation of the Empire** was laid in the 1700's under the brilliant statesman [William Pitt](#). Pitt master-minded the final victory of the British over the French in North America, the conquest of Bengal in India, and the buildup of British naval power. Shortly after these great victories, however, Pitt opposed [George III's](#) high-handed dealings with the American colonies and lost his influence in the government. Shortly after, the Revolutionary War cost Britain control of her most valuable colonies.

The Napoleonic Wars at the turn of the 19th century brought a protracted struggle with France. But after a twenty year conflict, Britain prevailed and for the next one hundred years dominated international trade, and influenced revolutionary movements throughout the world.

The 19th century was the **Height of the British Empire**. Much progress was made in science and industry. Political reforms included better representation for the middle class, Catholic emancipation in Ireland, and the abolition of slavery in the colonies. The settlement of British colonies throughout the world proceeded apace but was not accomplished without conflict. Britain became involved in numerous wars as it struggled to maintain a hold over its distant colonies. Despite these wars, by the end of the nineteenth century, Britain's international trade was the envy of the world, the industrial revolution brought enormous gains, and British influence was felt in countries and colonies all over the globe.

By the nineteenth century many of Britain's colonies grown enormously and were on the road to self-government. In North American, Britain spread her dominion from the eastern provinces along the St. Lawrence to the whole territory of **Canada**. Britain's colonies in **Australia and New Zealand** were founded at just about the same time the American colonies rebelled. Once Britain was forced to close its penal colonies in America and the territory of Australia became the new destination of choice for English criminals and debtors. Although it began as a distant outpost, during the 19th century Australia grew to be one of Britain's most populous and prosperous colonies.

Britain gained control of Dutch **South Africa** during the Napoleonic Wars and during the early years of British rule the colony grew slowly but steadily. There were problems with native warlords and the Dutch 'Boer' farmers resented British interference. But the conflicts did not become critical until diamonds and gold were discovered in the late 1800s and the foreign population boomed. The diamond baron Cecil Rhodes pressed his vision of a united Africa under British rule and the festering conflict lead to the second Boer War. But after three years



NAVAL BATTLE OFF THE COAST OF INDIA

of a viciously fought guerilla war the Dutch finally submitted to British rule. Britain also established colonies in both west (Nigeria) and east (Kenya) Africa, and interfered so much with the government of Egypt-Sudan that large regions of Africa were effectively under British control.

The story of the growth of British influence in **India** is one of the most complicated periods of British colonial history. The British hero most responsible for establishing Britain's empire in India was Robert Clive, a bold soldier who unexpectedly led Britain to a series of improbable victories in eastern India. By 1756 he conquered Bengal, the wealthiest province in India and over the next 100 years later governors added most of India to Britain's domains. The Indian Mutiny in 1856 was a disastrous setback for British interests, but the lack of unity among Indian natives doomed the revolt and within ten year Britain's hold on India was stronger than ever.

The 19th century had been one of great optimism for in Britain, but by the turn of the century signs of decay were beginning to show. The **Great War** (1914-18), was utterly disastrous, not only in material loss and human life, but in terms of human aspiration. The great promise of modernism, including the illusion of control that science and industry had placed in Britain's hands, began to break down as the dark side of technological progress showed its terrifying face. The British people, with their great faith in education and progress had all but forgotten how wretched even civilized men could become. They won the Great War, but lost their reckless faith in progress and within a generation; the British Empire began its final dissolution.