

## HEIGHT OF EMPIRE

1815 TO 1902

### END OF NAPOLEONIC WARS TO SECOND BOER WAR

#### ERA SUMMARY — HEIGHT OF EMPIRE

The years following the [Napoleonic Wars](#) were beset by domestic difficulties in Britain. The government had to raise taxes to pay off a massive war debt, and unemployment was a much greater problem than during the war time. Numerous domestic reforms had been put off during the war and the industrial revolution was wreaking havoc on traditional economies. Because of the shifting of wealth from the countryside to the cities there was a great deal of pressure to reform Parliament in order to more fairly represent newly populated areas. This resulted in the Reform Act of 1832, which enfranchised thousands of middle class citizens and better represented the new distribution of population. Other important reforms that were implemented after the war years were Catholic emancipation and the abolition of slavery in the colonies.

**Victorian Era**—The Victorian Era, lasting from 1837 to the close of the 19th century, was the heyday of the British Empire. The population of all of its colonies increased greatly during this time, both from indigenous growth, and the migration of Britain's own growing population. Land in Canada, Australia, and South Africa was cheap and any landless Englishman who could afford passage, could become established in the new colonies. Manufactured goods were becoming inexpensive, trade thrived, and a reasonably prosperous middle



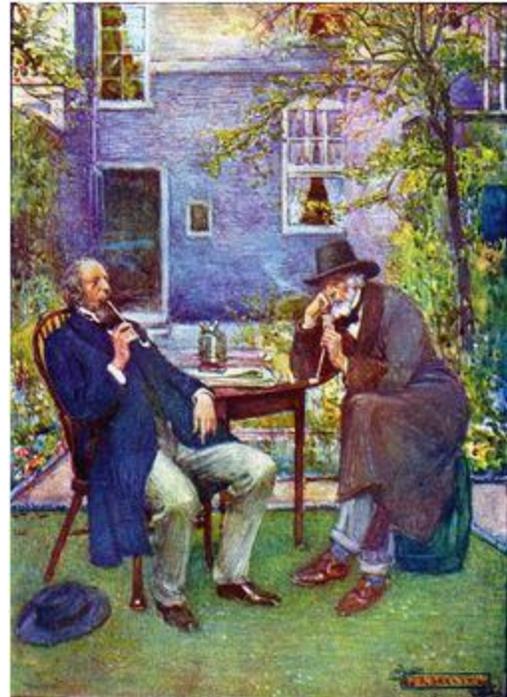
THE FIRST COUNCIL OF QUEEN VICTORIA

class was becoming a predominant political power for the first time in history. Rail travel was becoming widely available, making transportation to, and development of the interior regions of both Britain and its colonies much easier than before. Science and technology were yielding great discoveries during this time, increasing mankind's understanding of his physical world, and new ideas of change and progress were coming into conflict with traditional beliefs and ways of life.

During this same time however, some of the difficulties of governing such a large and diverse empire, were becoming apparent on both the domestic and international fronts. Although the decades following the Napoleonic War were relatively peaceful, by mid-century, Britain became

involved in a series of wars, in [China](#), [Afghanistan](#), [the Crimea](#), [India](#), [Burmah](#), [Egypt](#), [Soudan](#), [Greece](#), [West Africa](#), [Abyssinia](#), and [South Africa](#), that in many cases were required to maintain Britain's dominion over unruly native populations. These wars were not always popular either in Britain's colonial regions, or at home, and were the frequent cause of the collapse of whichever British governing party was currently in power.

**Politics and Culture**—In the realm of domestic politics, the commencement of the reign of Victoria coincided very nearly with the beginning of the new reformed parliament, which was at first dominated by Whigs. The reform-minded Whigs made many new laws which restricted the abuse of laborers in the factories, encouraged efforts applied towards public education, revised the poor-laws, and even abolished slavery in all of the colonies of the United Kingdom. Many of these laws, some of which required higher taxes, were contentious, and soon after the accession of [Queen Victoria](#) to the throne, the Tories, led by Prime Minister [Robert Peel](#), were back in power. The Tory (or conservative party) base however, had changed, and was increasingly sympathetic to the concerns of the middle classes, and was also known for lowering import and export duties, to encourage more trade. For most of the Victorian era power alternated between the domestic-reform minded Whigs, whose best known spokesman was [William Gladstone](#), and the imperial-reform minded Tories, whose best known spokesman was [Benjamin Disraeli](#).



CARLYLE AND TENNYSON TALKED AND SMOKED TOGETHER

In the fields of literature, arts, science, and invention, the Victorian age in Britain, was full of astounding genius. [Michael Faraday](#), [Lord Kelvin](#) and [James Clerk Maxwell](#), were all well known for their inquiries into electricity, magnetism, and thermodynamics, while [Charles Darwin](#) and [Thomas Huxley](#) put forth a theory of evolution that challenged accepted notions of Biblical Creation. Famous Victorian age poets include [Rudyard Kipling](#), Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Oscar Wilde, Robert Lewis Stevenson, and of course, [Alfred Tennyson](#). Victorian age novelists included [Charles Dickens](#), [William Thackeray](#), Jules Verne, and the Bronte sisters.

**Commerce, Free Trade and Colonial problems**—The ideas of [Adam Smith](#) had taken great hold of the commerce-minded middle class of Britain so free-market ideas which encouraged trade were becoming more prevalent in both parties. The reduction of import duties on manufactured goods, however, was not as controversial as the reduction of tariffs on food-stuffs (known as corn-laws), since the corn-laws protected the incomes on peasant farmers as well as the powerful landed squires. It was not until the crisis of the Irish potato famine in 1846, that the corn-laws, which raised the price of food for everyone, were abolished. This eased the

crisis somewhat, but the grievances of the Irish peasants against their British overlords were very great and long-standing. Catholic Ireland had been oppressed by Britain since the time of the reformation, and now that the British middle classes had won some political rights there was a great movement afoot in Ireland to achieve self-government, that was opposed by those in Britain who feared the radical element. The "Irish Problem", continued to be a controversial political problem in Britain, throughout the reign of Victoria, in spite of the best efforts of some statesmen sympathetic to the Irish, including [Daniel O'Connell](#), [Charles Parnell](#), and [William Gladstone](#).

By the mid-nineteenth century, Britain's international trade was the envy of the world, and it was by far the wealthiest and most powerful nation the world had ever seen. It had established trade, (sometimes forcibly, as in China), with almost every country on the globe and was actively trying to develop its colonies, by building railroads, encouraging commerce, and in some cases, supporting missionary activity. Its prestige however, took several blows, in the mid 1850's first with the [Crimean War](#), when due to commercial concerns; she took the side of the degenerate Ottoman Empire against Russia. Soon after, the [Indian Mutiny](#), a wide-scale rebellion against British authority, broke out and was only put down at great cost after a series of disturbing atrocities. Following shortly afterward were the infamous [Opium Wars](#) with China. While Britain achieved military victories in all these conflicts, the contention and controversies involved planted seeds of anti-imperialism both inside and outside British domains.

**Exploration and Colonization of Africa**—The colonization and exploration of Africa, particularly the regions of South Africa, was accomplished primarily during the Victorian era, much later than that of Asia, and it was desired to avoid some of the missteps that Britain had taken in Asia. Unquestionably, in Africa there was a more conscious effort to deal fairly with the native populations, and utilize missionary activities to help "civilize" the inhabitants. For most of the 19th century, for example, Britain worked actively against the slave trade, and tried to keep peace among warring tribes, when possible. However, there were, as always, great difficulties, and Britain was pulled into wars in South Africa, against both the [Zulus](#) and their enemies, the [Boers](#), who had resisted British rule. Britain was also drawn into conflicts in West Africa, and the Egypt-Sudan region, where native war-lords rose against the Ottoman-Egyptian government, a British ally. The African interior, which was entirely unexplored by white men, was also tackled during this era, most notably by [David Livingstone](#), a Scottish missionary, but other British explorers included [H. M. Stanley](#), [Richard Burton](#), and [John Hanning Speke](#).

# CHARACTERS – HEIGHT OF EMPIRE

## MONARCHS/STATESMEN

- Victoria I** 1819–1901 Longest reigning English Monarch. Presided over the British Empire at its height.
- Robert Peel** 1788–1850 Important Victorian Era British prime minister who oversaw several free market and political reforms.
- Benjamin Disraeli** 1804–1881 Prime Minister, Author, and conservative rival of Gladstone.
- William Gladstone** 1809–1898 Prime minister and member of the Liberal Party. Opponent of Disraeli.
- Charles Parnell** 1846–1891 Irish Catholic politician who fought for home rule for Ireland.
- Cecil Rhodes** 1853–1902 Power broker in South Africa, tried to turn all provinces into a British Colony.

## MILITARY

- Lord Raglan** 1788–1855 Field Marshall of English Forces during the Crimean War.
- Henry Havelock** 1795–1857 Led a division to relieve Lucknow during the Sepoy Rebellion. Died during the siege.
- William Brydon** 1811–1873 Surgeon in the Bengal army; sole survivor of the massacre at Khyber pass in Afghanistan.
- Charles Gordon** 1833–1885 General who defeated the Tai-pings in China, served as governor in Soudan and resisted the Mahdi in Khartoum.
- Lord Roberts** 1832–1914 Career officer, saw service in Indian Mutiny, Afghanistan, Abyssinia, India and South Africa.
- Horatio Kitchener** 1850–1916 Military hero of the late 19th century, first in Sudan, and later in the Boer Wars
- John Franklin** 1786–1847 Explorer of the Artic regions of Canada.

## ART AND LITERATURE

- Sir Walter Scott** 1771–1832 Author best known for novels set in Scotland.
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning** 1809–1861 Eminent poet of the Victorian era. Married to Robert Browning.
- Charles Dickens** 1812–1870 Prolific novelist of the Victorian Era. Wrote *David Copperfield*, *A Christmas Carol* and others.
- Thomas Carlyle** 1795–1881 Popular Victorian age essayist and historian.
- Alfred Tennyson** 1809–1892 Best known poet of he Victorian Age. Write *Idylls of the King* and many others.
- Rudyard Kipling** 1865–1936 Kipling's novel's and poetry are associated with British Imperialism, for good and ill.

## HEROINES

- Grace Darling** 1815–1842 British heroine who saved sailors from a ship that crashed on her father's lighthouse.
- Florence Nightingale** 1820–1910 Nurse who reformed the care of wounded soldiers during the Crimean War.

# TIMELINE – HEIGHT OF EMPIRE

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

- 1829 Catholic Emancipation in Ireland—Catholics allowed to vote.
- 1832 First Reform Act—Whigs take control of Parliament.
- 1833 Abolition of Slavery in British colonies.
- 1837 [Queen Victoria](#) ascends to the throne of England.
- 1846 Potato Famine in Ireland; Repeal of the Corn Laws enhances Free Trade.
- 1851 The Great Exhibition opens in the Crystal Palace in London
- 1868-74 First Ministry of [William Gladstone](#)—promotes a liberal reform agenda.
- 1874-80 Second Ministry of [Benjamin Disraeli](#)—promotes a conservative imperial agenda.
- 1875 Egyptian Share of Suez canal is sold to Britain.
- 1887 Fiftieth year Jubilee of Queen Victoria.
- 1901 Death of Queen Victoria

## WARS AND CONFLICTS

- 1842 [Retreat from Afghanistan](#)—Massacre of British Army at Kyber Pass.
- 1854-56 [Crimean War](#)—Britain allies itself with Ottomans to oppose Russian expansion.
- 1857 [Indian Mutiny](#) —rebellion of Sepoys put down with great slaughter.
- 1879 [Zulu Wars](#)—British prevail over Zulus after suffering a massacre at *Isandhlwana*
- 1880 [First Boer War](#)—British concede to Boer demands after suffering serious defeats.
- 1882 [Arabi's Rebellion](#) put down at the *Battle of Tel-al-Kebar*.
- 1883-1904 [Soudan Campaign](#)—British quell a murderous Moslem fanatic cult in the Soudan.
- 1885 Death of [Charles Gordon](#) at the *Siege of Khartoum*—British relief fails to arrive in time.
- 1898 [Horatio Kitchener](#) defeats the rebel Madhists at the *Battle of Obdurman*.
- 1899-1901 [Second Boer War](#)—Hard fought victory forces the Boers to submit to British rule.

## EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY

- 1852 [David Livingstone](#) begins his first expedition into Africa.
- 1858 The first trans-Atlantic cable is laid from Ireland to Newfoundland.

## ARTS AND CULTURE

- 1870 Death of [Charles Dickens](#), popular British novelist.

# RECOMMENDED READING – HEIGHT OF EMPIRE

## CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS\*

- Haaren - [Famous Men of Modern Times](#) [William Ewart Gladstone](#) (1)
- Harding - [The Story of England](#) [A Period of Reform](#) to [British Empire under Edward VII.](#) (5)
- Synge - [Reign of Queen Victoria](#) *entire book*
- Gaskoin - [The Hanoverians](#) [Waterloo to Sevastopol](#) to [Justice, Defence, Taxation](#) (2)

## SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sellar - [The Story of Lord Roberts](#) *entire book*
- Lang - [The Story of General Gordon](#) *entire book*
- Synge - [Growth of the British Empire](#) *entire book*
- Synge - [Life of Gladstone](#) *entire book*
- Richards - [Florence Nightingale](#) *entire book*
- Wood - [Boy's Book of Battles](#) [Balaclava](#) to [Delhi](#) (3)
- Wood - [Boy's Book of Battles](#) [Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift](#) to [Omdurman](#) (3)
- Marshall - [Our Island Story](#) [The First Gentleman in Europe](#) to [Boer and Briton](#) (10)
- Church - [English History Stories - III](#) [Navarino](#) to [Queen and Empress](#) (6)
- Morris - [Historical Tales - English](#) [The Massacre of an Army](#) to [Jubilees of Queen Victoria](#) (2)

## ALSO RECOMMENDED

- Tappan - [Days of Queen Victoria](#) *entire book*
- Synge - [Great Englishwomen](#) [Mary Somerville](#) to [Florence Nightingale](#) (3)
- Marshall - [English Literature](#) [Byron—"Childe Harold"](#) to [Tennyson—Poet of Friendship](#) (7)

\* *Level I and II Study Questions are based on **Core** Reading Assignments.*