



[Home](#) > [Gallery](#) > [Case Study](#) > Background

[Search this exhibition](#)

[Print](#)



CASE STUDY 1 BACKGROUND: THE BRITISH VIEW OF THE EMPIRE

- [The British view of the empire](#)
- [What do we mean by British?](#)
- [The historical debate about the empire](#)
- [Links](#)

⚙ **The British view of the empire**

Here is how one historian has summarised the British view of the British empire:

For two centuries, possession of empire was justified by British politicians on either authoritarian or libertarian grounds and sometimes on both. Those who saw the virtues of empire as authoritarian maintained that it committed the rulers, or 'guardians', to service and bound the ruled to obedience; while those who saw the empire as libertarian claimed that it provided subject peoples with freedom from oppression at the hands of lesser breeds without the law, such as their own leaders or foreign adventurers or unbridled British colonialists. Witness, for example, the claims that British rule was preferable to that of the French, Dutch, Germans, or Belgians, and that the empire would free Asians from oriental despotism, Africans from barbaric customs, Maoris from settler rapacity, and white settlers from international aggression.

This extract comes from 'Power, Authority and Freedom' by AJ Stockwell, Professor of Imperial and Commonwealth History at the University of London. In the rest of this publication Professor Stockwell argues that we should not accept all these claims about the greatness of British rule. On the other hand, he believes that we should not dismiss all the claims either.

⚙ **What do we mean by British?**

The story of the British empire is very complicated. To begin with, the British empire was huge. At its height it ruled over more than a quarter of the world and millions of people were subjects of the empire. No empire had ever been this big before, and no empire had ever ruled over so many different peoples of different cultures.

There is also the question of what historians mean by British. By the later 1800s there were British soldiers, officials and traders all over the empire. There were also settlers, especially in Africa, Australia and Canada. Most of the families of these settlers originally came from Britain, but they did not see themselves as entirely British. Then there were the native peoples of the empire. Many Indians who served in the British army were proud to serve in the British army, but they still saw themselves as Indians. Native Americans in North America accepted that the British monarch was their ruler, but on a day-to-day basis they followed the authority of their local leaders. All of these factors make it impossible to say exactly how the British empire worked. It worked slightly differently in the different parts of the world where the British ruled.

Image 1



A poster from 1928 showing the port of Liverpool, the western gateway of the empire. Most of Britain's trade with America, the West Indies and much of Africa flowed through Liverpool (PRO ref: CO 956/506)

We can say some things about British rule, which were true in most parts of the empire.

- Trade played a key role in holding the empire together. British businesses sold their goods to the countries of the empire. Empire countries were a major (but not the only) part of Britain's market for exports. In return, empire countries sent back some manufactured goods, food, raw materials and minerals. To help this trade British companies built railways and invested in projects like mines and dams.
- Military power was a key part of British rule. In areas like India and South Africa the British relied on their armed forces as well as trading links to keep control of their empire. However, remember that most of the British soldiers were not from Britain. India provided huge numbers of troops for Britain's forces in many parts of the world.
- Co-operation between the British and local rulers was vital. In many areas of the empire, especially India and West Africa, there were very few British officials. This tiny number of officials ruled over vast areas and millions of people. They were only able to do this by co-operating with local rulers. These rulers co-operated with the British usually because they got something in return (often a trading opportunity). The British also usually allowed local customs to continue. In Malaya, for example, British visitors commented on the fact that British law, local laws and Islamic laws all operated, depending on which system seemed to provide the best answer to local problems. Most of the rich and powerful people in the countries of the empire did well from British rule. However, the mass of ordinary people in the empire probably gained little from British rule, and may have lost out. On the other hand, these ordinary people may not have been better off if ruled by their own rulers rather than the British. Also, the majority of the ordinary poor in Britain gained little from Britain's empire.

Image 2



The front page of a journal called Colonial Engineering, which was celebrating British engineering projects in the empire
(PRO ref: COPY 1/68 f.15)

⚙️ The historical debate about the empire

Just about the only thing that all historians agree on is that the story of living in the British empire is not a simple story. The impact of British rule on the countries of the empire is very controversial. Millions suffered as a result of the empire building of the British and other Europeans like the Germans, French and Belgians. The historian Professor Simon Schama believes that the British empire was based on hypocrisy. He feels that the British talked about liberty, good government and free trade without actually doing it. They took most of the benefits and profits and did not allow most of the people in the empire the benefits of democracy or free trade.

The historian Professor Niall Ferguson argues that British rule was a lot better than German, French or Belgian rule. His research suggests that British investors put huge amounts of money into developing the economies of Africa. As the British empire spread, so did modern technology like the telegraph (which has been called the Victorian Internet by some historians). He also points out that British rule was usually honest - rare in empires. Finally, he suggests that most British colonies adopted democracy after the British left. He does not deny that many suffered as a result of the empire, but he believes that we should take a balanced view of the empire - it was not all good or all bad.

⚙️ Links

Empire

<http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/heads/library/empire.html>

Web site to accompany the TV series in which Professor Niall Ferguson sets out his views on the empire

The Empire of Good Intentions

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/hob/prog_14.shtml

Web site to accompany the programme in Professor Simon Schama's History of Britain TV series that addressed the British empire

BRITISH EMPIRE

Living in the British empire – the British view



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Background source one

A poster from 1928 showing the port of Liverpool, the western gateway of the empire. Most of Britain's trade with America, the West Indies and much of Africa flowed through Liverpool

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[Top of page](#) | [Print](#) | [Close](#)

BRITISH EMPIRE

Living in the British empire – the British view

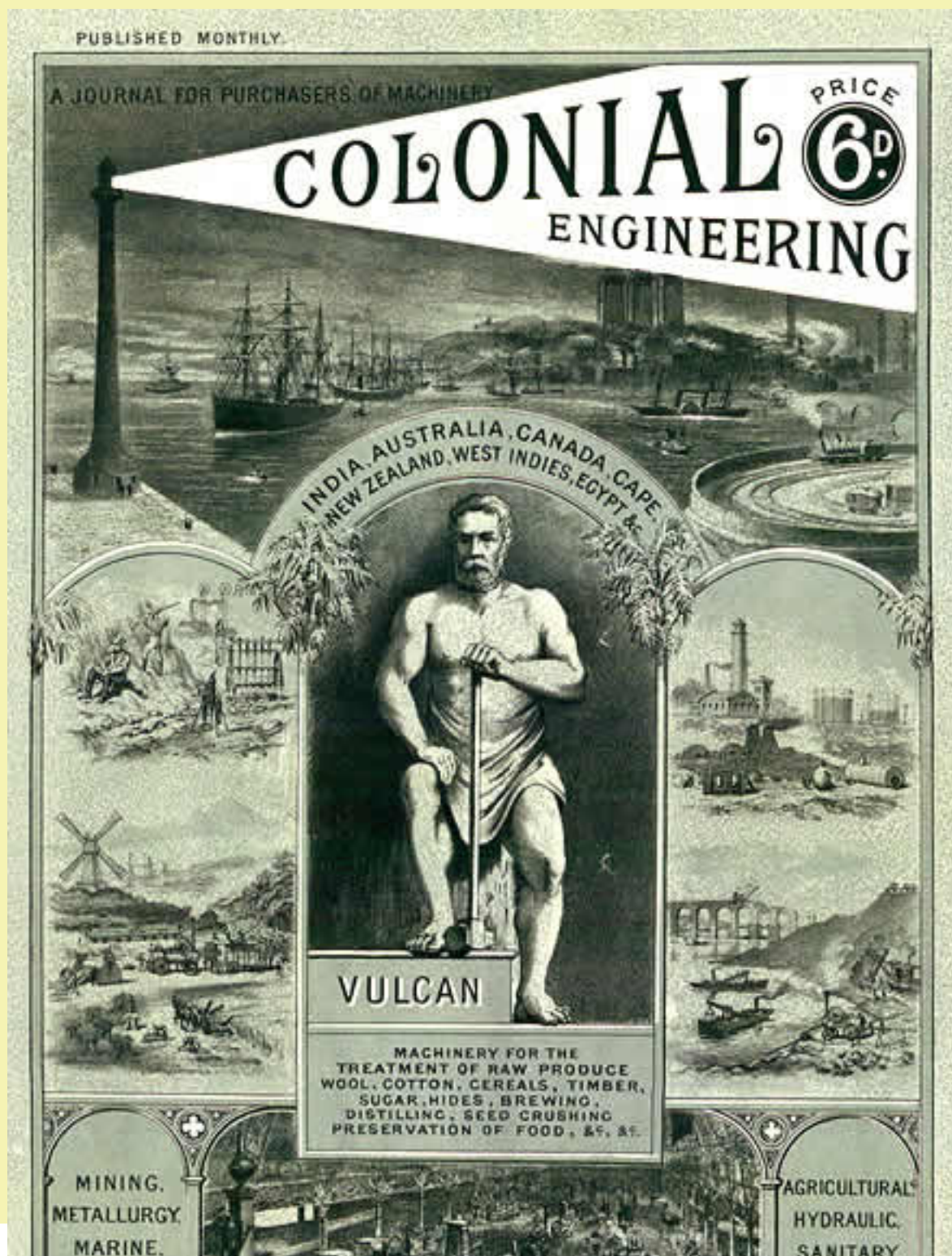


[Transcript](#) | [Print](#) | [Close](#)

Background source two

The front page of a journal called Colonial Engineering, which was celebrating British engineering projects in the empire

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[Top of page](#) | [Print](#) | [Close](#)