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# The British Empire

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Jane  
Samson



# The British Empire

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*Edited by Jane Samson*

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
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Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Cape Town  
Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi  
Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
Paris São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw  
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Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

Editorial matter and Selection © Jane Samson, 2001

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First published as an Oxford University Press paperback 2001

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Data available

ISBN 0-19-289293-2

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante  
by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk  
Printed in Great Britain by  
Biddles Ltd., Guildford, Surrey

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## Preface

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One of imperialism's most divisive legacies lies in the realm of language, especially the language of representation. The British empire circled the globe between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, and during that time racial and cultural terminology changed extensively. Historical material often contains language that is considered unacceptable today. But the problem goes further than that: terms that are used proudly in one country today might cause grave offence in another. For example, Australia's aboriginal peoples are reclaiming the word 'black' at the same time as 'black' is being rejected in favour of 'African American' in the United States. 'Native' peoples in Canada would probably be surprised to know how offended Africans would be to be called 'Natives'. An expression that is insisted upon in one place might be considered racist in another.

The issue of descriptive terminology was therefore a difficult one to resolve for this volume. American usage is becoming more widespread, but to refer to black Loyalists during the American Revolution as 'African Americans' is clearly inappropriate; they identified as British subjects. Black people in Britain, the West Indies, and elsewhere refer to themselves in a variety of ways, but 'black' is a common reference in most cases. A similar example concerns Canada's indigenous population. Rather than calling themselves 'Amerindians', as in the United States, they are First Nations, Natives, or First Peoples. In another case, people of south Asian descent in Canada are usually called 'East Indians' to distinguish them from West Indians (in the Caribbean) and Native Indians (or First Nations). This last example actually tells the story of European imperialism in miniature. Believing they had found Asia—the Indies—Christopher Columbus and his successors labelled the indigenous Caribbean peoples 'Indians', and the whole region became known as the 'West Indies' in English. Soon the entire indigenous population of the Americas also became known as 'Indians'. As British rule spread through South Asia, the various peoples of that region became known collectively as 'Indians' despite their wide variety of political or ethnic identities. Even in the south Pacific, explorers like Captain Cook referred to island peoples and Australian aborigines as 'Indians'. At the heart of this process of identification was the assumption that Europeans had a right to label non-Europeans. It is no wonder that, in the post-colonial world, the search for acceptable collective names is both passionate and controversial. Wishing to be sensitive to this complexity, I have not imposed uniform terms in my headnotes or introductions. Instead I have used terminology that, to the best of my knowledge, would be considered acceptable to the peoples concerned.

I owe many people my thanks for their support and assistance during the preparation of this book. Chris Bayly of Cambridge University, and George Miller of OUP, gave me the opportunity to write the book. Peter Marshall, Katherine Prior, and Glyndwr Williams read chapters, uncovered new sources, and made many valuable suggestions and criticisms. Staff at the British Library, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies library, the National Maritime Museum, and the library of the University of Alberta, gave me invaluable assistance. Fiona Kinnear, my editor for the completion of the project, showed great patience during my move from the UK to Canada. Thanks must also go to my husband Simon for his never-failing support, and to my son Alexander who very kindly delayed his arrival until after I had finished a draft of the manuscript. I would like to dedicate this book to him.

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## Introduction

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### *Empire and identity*

**T**he British empire expanded and declined over a period of five centuries. It was the largest territorial empire in world history. For these reasons it is difficult—perhaps foolish—to try to uncover a general theme that can be traced through the whole story. Nevertheless, an organizing principle of some sort is a great help for students and teachers alike, and for this volume I have chosen the theme of identity.

Historians once assumed that countries, and their populations, progressed naturally towards modern nationhood and citizenship. Lately these concepts have been questioned, and most scholars today see identities—whether national, racial, or cultural—as having been created by historical circumstances including imperialism. To put it simply: the British empire changed the way people saw and defined themselves. British colonies often contained groups of people who had never before shared a common political destiny; the British empire also featured mass migrations which introduced large numbers of immigrants into parts of the world where they had never lived before. Countries like Canada or Malaysia acquired what we now call ‘multi-cultural’ populations which contained everything from indigenous peoples to British or European immigrants and the descendants of immigrant workers from India, China, and elsewhere. These groups acquired a new identity—‘British subjects’—and that identity itself changed after independence to become ‘Canadians’ or ‘Malaysians’.

It is easy to see why this new, national identity was so effective at first. Even in a colony ruled by foreigners, with artificial boundaries that took no account of traditional indigenous groupings, a national identity was supremely useful in creating a unified fight for independence. After independence was achieved it provided a focus for unity and optimism about the new country’s future as a modern nation state.

But what it means to be a Canadian or a Malaysian today is by no means straightforward, as ethnic tensions in both countries (and many others) prove. People of different cultural backgrounds, or with different standards of living, can disagree about what the characteristics of the national identity should be. What should the national language be? Should there be one or more official religions? Is democratic rule important? These questions did not go away after independence from Britain was achieved, and as a result historians are able to see identities as changeable and controversial rather than fixed or inevitable. By using the theme of identity and linking it with the story of the



British empire, this book can provide insight into many of today's most important international debates.

Identities in Britain itself were also influenced by empire. The different peoples of the British Isles came together when they went overseas, and this helped create a collective 'British' identity at home. 'Britishness' eventually began to include peoples from other parts of the world when Indians, Africans, and others migrated to Britain in increasing numbers during the twentieth century. Finally, their empire gave British people an international role that was, for a time, uniquely powerful. The development and decline of that imperial identity took place over time and was subject to the same challenges that confronted identities in the colonies. As in the colonies, different groups in Britain itself had their own ideas about what the empire was for, and whether or not it was a good thing. The empire could be both unifying and divisive: a paradox which helps to explain why the story of empire is so fascinating, and its legacy so complicated.

### *The making of Britain*

Before going into detail about Britain's imperial identity, the domestic identity of 'Britain' itself needs explanation. The word reflects centuries of English expansion beginning in the middle ages when the Normans and their successors began colonizing parts of Wales and Ireland. The Tudor monarchs brought both countries directly under the English Crown during the sixteenth century, although the Crown's actual control was confined to particular areas only. The English and Scottish thrones were themselves combined in 1603 when James VI of Scotland succeeded Elizabeth Tudor, and by this time English and Scottish Protestants had settled in northern Ireland. After the union of parliaments with Scotland in 1707, the word 'Britain' became a convenient way of referring to the new political entity of England, Wales, and Scotland.

Ireland's relationship to Britain varied considerably: although Henry VIII and his successors claimed the kingship of Ireland there was a separate Irish parliament until 1801. In that year a new name—'United Kingdom'—had to be invented to reflect the union of parliaments between Britain and Ireland; today, Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom. Even after these centuries of political change, many people today (especially in North America, in my experience) still refer to the United Kingdom as 'England'. In the past, Scots and others also used the word 'English' to identify and distinguish themselves from, say, Spaniards in the Americas or Indians in south Asia. It was a convenient shorthand revealing England's dominance in the making of Britain.

### *Britain's imperial identity*

This domestic background was intimately connected with the development of the British empire. England's experience of conquest and settlement in Ireland formed a blueprint for its early plantation colonies in the Americas and West Indies; these early colonies, then, were technically 'English' colonies before 1603. After the union of crowns in that year, Scotland had a direct political stake in overseas expansion, and Scots, Welsh, and Irish emigrated along with the English to the settlement colonies. By the time 'Britain' came into being in 1707 there was already a 'British empire' composed of settlers, labourers, and traders drawn from all parts of the British Isles. This joint participation did much to solidify political and cultural ties at home, and those ties made it easier for all Britons to participate in the building of empire. In other words, Britain and its empire created a definition of Britishness much larger than a merely domestic national identity.

The 'Britishness' of the British empire may have been established by the eighteenth century, but this did not mean that British perceptions of the empire were straightforward or unchanging. What was the empire for? How should it be run and by whom? Debates about these questions raged throughout the empire's history. The early empire was closely connected with the British Crown's power and privileges: a very different type of empire from a later one which favoured free trade and large-scale emigration. By the twentieth century a dual empire had developed consisting of self-governing settler colonies like Canada and tropical colonies like India governed undemocratically through doctrines of trusteeship and 'development' theory. Thus the identity and purpose of empire could alter radically over time, and one of the most notable characteristics of the British empire was its remarkable adaptability in the face of change.

Culture influenced those changes as much as political or economic factors did. For example, the evangelical Christian revival of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries helped to inspire the anti-slavery and missionary movements. Empire was always about commerce, but now it was about being Christian and humane as well. Changing ideas about race were also important: black people, once divided into Christian and non-Christian categories by the British, became increasingly identified with slavery and inferiority regardless of their religious beliefs. By the later nineteenth century, scientific racism offered the British a new way of relegating non-Europeans to an apparently permanent status of subordination.

Crises also affected imperial identities. The loss of the American colonies in 1783, the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and Britain's diminished international status after the Second World War are examples of events which intensified debate about the nature and future of empire. When other European powers began building extensive empires of their own during the late nineteenth

century, the British began speaking of an 'Anglo-Saxon' empire in order to distinguish it from other European ethnic identities such as Gallic (French) or Teutonic (German). During this time the British approved of American expansion in the Philippines and other former Spanish colonies because the United States shared their superior 'Anglo-Saxon' destiny.

The British were not always in control of this process of identity formation, however. It is true that they categorized colonial populations in ways that fit with current notions about what the empire was for. The same group of people could be variously identified as collaborators to be courted, enemies to be defeated, commercial opportunities to be exploited, or victims to be protected. But these identities could be challenged or replaced by others fashioned by colonial peoples themselves. British settlers could develop identities different from, and even at odds with, their domestic British counterparts. As we will see, the American colonists often appealed to a shared 'Englishness' when demanding greater liberty from British government regulation; the different political factions in America were normally labelled 'Whigs' and 'Tories', as they were in Britain. Later, during the War of Independence, the colonists abandoned this shared identity in favour of a distinction between 'Americans' and 'British'.

Non-Europeans had an even wider range of options because they already had their own indigenous identities when the British first arrived. Such peoples could see themselves in various ways after colonial rule began. The ancient ties of kinship, religion, or tribe still persisted, but these could be combined with—or even overturned by—newer ones. This was often a necessity when indigenous peoples were confronted with the dislocations of the colonial period. A good example of a hybrid traditional-modern identity was the Maori King movement in mid-nineteenth-century New Zealand. There was no centralized political identity among the Maori before the British came, but increasing British settlement created the need for a co-ordinated Maori response. The result was the emergence of a Maori king as a symbol of unity, and the creation of a new, unified identity for the land itself: 'Maoridom' or, more recently, 'Aotearoa' as a substitute for the European 'New Zealand'.

Even the end of empire was bound up with changing identities. The British often delayed self-government for non-European populations in the name of protective trusteeship. Later, the multiracial identity of the Commonwealth allowed a more equitable relationship to emerge. In the colonies, nationalisms were developing which rejected British imperialism while exploiting many of its characteristics: the use of English, the centralizing effect of railways and printing presses, and the impact of Western political philosophies. These hybrid nationalisms have left the post-colonial world with many dilemmas. Having rejected the identity of 'British subject', nationalist movements were faced, after independence, with the

problem of promoting national unity in populations divided by gender, race, class, religion, and language.

In many cases these divisions were aggravated, and even created by, colonial rule. The importation of African, south Asian, and Chinese labour produced dramatic demographic and social change in many British colonies. Once they achieved self-government, Canada and Australia both passed anti-Chinese legislation meant to rid their new nations of unwelcome Asian elements. After independence in the former African colonies of Kenya and Uganda, their south Asian populations were forcibly expelled in the name of 'Africanization'. The common factor in each of these cases is the role of empire in moving large numbers of people around the globe with unpredictable results, and one of the most acute political challenges of the twenty-first century will be the tension between competing local, national, and international identities. An understanding of imperial history is essential for the full complexity of this problem to be understood.

There is yet another dimension to the relationship between imperialism and national identity. Unlike its tropical colonies in Africa, Asia, or the Pacific islands, Britain's colonies of settlement acquired self-government rapidly and peacefully in the nineteenth century, and full independence by 1931. Britain saw Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand as evidence of its superiority to empires such as Spain's, which had gained independence only after civil war. But this triumphant story of peaceful British settlement and self-rule in the so-called white Dominions was (and is) deceptive. During the nineteenth century the indigenous populations of these countries were increasingly excluded from the developing process of nationalism and self-government. Indigenous peoples were denied the vote until the 1960s in Canada and Australia, and their numbers and culture were devastated by aggressive assimilation policies and the effects of disease and poverty. South Africa, self-governing after 1910, adopted the racial segregation system known as *apartheid* which severely limited the civil rights of non-Europeans; only in 1994 were the first non-racial elections held in South Africa. In such countries, a double colonization can be said to have taken place. The European colonists and their descendants tended to focus on themselves and their struggle for political independence from Britain, obscuring the fact that this process had excluded the original inhabitants. Many indigenous activists today would argue that, apart from South Africa, the former Dominions have not yet begun decolonization within their own borders.

But it would be wrong to dwell only on the divisive legacy of empire. Many of the features of globalization—free trade, long-range communications, and the widespread use of English—have their roots in the massive imperial expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An important global political organization—the Commonwealth of Nations—is also a legacy of empire. Composed of almost all of Britain's former colonies, its

ongoing popularity comes from a combination of shared history and common future aspirations. During the twentieth century the Commonwealth has been, variously, a white Dominions club, a testing ground for racial tolerance, a matrix for sporting, educational, and technological exchanges, and a human rights forum. It has successfully reinvented imperial relationships to suit the needs of post-colonial states. Although the current British monarch is the symbolic head of the Commonwealth, Britain itself has played an increasingly low-key role in the organization, and at its remarkable biennial heads of government meetings, the leaders of its member states go on retreat together without the usual entourage of advisers and media. The tiniest Pacific island nations meet on equal terms with the heads of the most populous and influential members. There is no doubt that the Commonwealth's origins are imperial, but its activities confirm that global connections can convey benefits as well as injustices.

### *Why an empire reader?*

I have been struck by the large number of readers on theories of imperialism—especially post-colonial literary theory—that are available to students today, and puzzled by the absence of affordable collections of historical material. In other words, students and their teachers can easily find out what today's intellectuals think about empire, but must turn to older works, or burrow in archives, in order to access texts from the age of empire itself.

One reason for the decline in document readers is undoubtedly the decreasing popularity of political and economic history; today's academic climate tends to favour literary or cultural approaches. There is a perception (misguided in my opinion) which sees political and economic history as increasingly irrelevant to the study of empire. But important as culture is, it cannot be magically uncoupled from other aspects of society, and trade can be as vital a part of identity formation as literature.

Let me explain what my own approach has been. Like detectives, historians can learn much by 'following the money', and the economic policies of the British empire, like those of any global organization, had an enormous effect on world history. I have therefore paid close attention to the changing economic underpinning of the empire, taking the story right up to the 'development' policies which are still the subject of so much controversy in international relations today. Political and legal sources are no less essential if identity issues are to be fully explored. Here we find the definitions of race, citizenship, land rights, education objectives, and official language policies that were so critical to distinctions between 'us' and 'them'. I agree with those who say that cultural artefacts also have much to tell us, and for that reason I have included extracts of poetry and fiction in this collection. It is my

hope that a wide range of types of material, rather than a more exclusive focus, will give students a better sense of the enormous complexity of empire.

Because this volume covers such a vast chronological and geographical subject, my document selections were inevitably arbitrary and specialists will, no doubt, lament the neglect of their own special fields of interest. But if I can give students a broad overview of British imperialism, and provide instructors with a resource to supplement other readings, then I will have achieved my purpose. My hope is that teachers of world history, colonialism, and nationalism will all find this book useful.

This reader is divided into four roughly chronological chapters. Each chapter has a general introduction placing the British empire into a world history context, and individual sections then take up themes or issues from a range of perspectives. Most chapters combine a number of extracts from contemporary material with analysis by a leading historian; these are meant to provide additional information, to cover areas not dealt with by the contemporary material, and to introduce students to various theories about the motives and means of imperial expansion.

The only exception to this pattern is Chapter 4 on the twentieth century. Because decolonization was so rapid, and took place relatively recently, theories of decolonization are still in the developmental stages. There is a growing secondary literature on the end of empire, but it was not always possible to find material on the particular case studies and comparisons I wished to make. For this reason, several secondary extracts have been placed with some contemporary material in the first section of Chapter 4. The remaining sections compare decolonization in colonies of various types using a larger than usual number of contemporary extracts. This format allowed me to introduce students to general questions about decolonization in the first section, and then to delve into the nationalisms, conflicts, and special circumstances of the various case studies I chose. For practical reasons I decided to confine the story to the period leading up to independence in each country described, and I concentrated on colonies that became independent between 1947 and 1980. Britain still retains a handful of tiny dependencies, and even its former colonies still struggle with the legacy of imperialism. Perhaps, in this sense, the story of the British empire has no clear ending.

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## Chapter 1

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### The Early Empire

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#### INTRODUCTION

**W**e have seen that the word ‘Britain’ reflects a long history of conquest, colonization, and consolidation. As British influence expanded overseas this process continued on a larger scale, and the acquisition of an empire became an important feature of British identity. Some features of this imperial identity would remain remarkably constant, based as they were on the geography of the British Isles. The ocean was England’s means of communication, trade, and warfare with the outside world, and England’s first empire was an empire of the sea.

The Portuguese led European overseas exploration and trade in the fifteenth century, and English sailors often joined Portuguese voyages to west Africa, Asia, and Brazil. But by the sixteenth century the greatest colonial power was Spain, whose conquests in the Caribbean and central/south America were vast; Spain then acquired control of the Portuguese empire when it incorporated Portugal itself between 1580 and 1640. The Dutch were active, too, dominating the East Indies spice trade and ousting the Portuguese from most of the west African coast by the end of the sixteenth century.

England’s ventures were modest by comparison: a brief exploration of the north-east North American seaboard by John Cabot in 1497; summer settlements in Newfoundland for the north Atlantic fishery; and exploration/privateering voyages against the Spanish by men like Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh. England’s defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 encouraged further expansion, but the Dutch presence in south-east Asia forced the English East India Company to obtain footholds in south Asia to gain access to the valuable spice trade.

Meanwhile, the united Spanish/Portuguese monarchy proved unable to prevent incursions in its traditional areas of influence. The expansion of Dutch and English influence in Africa was a case in point. Portuguese exploration and trade with Africa flourished in the fifteenth century, and there were a chain of Portuguese outposts along the African coasts, trading for gold, ivory, spices, and slaves. But these small settlements led a precarious existence: isolated, devastated by disease, and dependent on the goodwill of neighbouring African leaders. After its conquest by Spain, Portugal saw its overseas interests neglected in favour of Spanish colonies, and the Dutch and

English (among others) were quick to take advantage of this situation. An English trading post at Cormantine in west Africa was augmented by the seizure of Cape Coast Castle from the Dutch in 1664. By this time the slave trade was driving European expansion in west Africa; Portugal's domination of the trade to the Spanish American colonies—Spain had no base of its own in Africa—declined during its struggle for independence from Spain in the early seventeenth century. Spain was forced to turn to the Protestant maritime powers, Holland and England, to maintain its supply of African slaves. This ready market, plus that of its own plantation colonies in the West Indies and North America, allowed several English chartered companies and a large number of individual traders to build up England's share of the slave trade.

England's first successful plantation in North America was Virginia, refounded (after several false starts) in 1607. Modelled on the plantations owned by English and Scots in Ireland, the Virginia settlement—like all of Britain's early settlements in the Americas—was based on British royal patronage. Groups of merchants, aristocrats, and gentry obtained grants of land from the Crown which gave permission to settle colonists and begin farming. The same process characterized British expansion in the West Indies where islands claimed by Spain, such as Barbados, were colonized by the British during the 1620s and 1630s. Britain also took the Spanish colony of Jamaica by force in 1655. By the end of the seventeenth century British plantations were growing a wide variety of crops including tobacco and sugar. In return for the granting of land, the British government required the colonists to trade exclusively with Britain and one another, and to use only British shipping. Even after most of the merchant venturers had relinquished control, and the colonies became virtually self-contained settlements, the restrictions on non-British trade and transport remained. This economic exclusiveness—known as protectionism—was a prominent characteristic of the early British empire.

England's other trans-Atlantic colonies were not always founded for purely commercial reasons. Newfoundland was occupied only during the fishing season. English Puritans, Quakers, and Catholics established settlements in what is now the north-eastern United States, attempting to create godly communities based on particular social and theological principles. The first of these colonies was at Plymouth in 1620. But these idealistic settlements took place within the usual context of international rivalry and economics. They were bulwarks of Englishness between the Spanish territories to the south, and New France (later Quebec) to the north. They were also reinforcements against the Dutch, whose creation of 'New Netherland' around the Hudson River had threatened to divide areas of influence that England regarded as its own.

The seventeenth century featured several wars between Britain and the Netherlands, and a British victory in 1664 renamed New Amsterdam as New York, giving Britain control of the entire north-eastern seaboard (see Map 1).



By 1700 there were eleven English colonies along this coast, from Maine to the Carolinas. France, however, retained a strong inland presence from its bases in New France and Acadia. To counter this, and to claim a larger share of the profitable fur trade, Charles II chartered the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670 to exploit all of the lands drained by rivers flowing into the Bay: a third of the North American continent. From bases established in the hinterland, it was hoped, England could circumvent the French settlements and find a Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean and the riches of Asia. The inevitable clash with France in North America, in the Pacific, and elsewhere, would dominate the eighteenth-century empire.

## I.1 AN EMPIRE OF THE SEA

In the earliest English voyages of exploration we can see close connections between the English Crown, seaborne trade, and imperial expansion. King Henry VII despatched John Cabot in 1497 to investigate the Atlantic coast of what is now Canada, but Cabot's findings were minimal (Extract 1). It was during the sixteenth century that explorers, fishermen, and traders enhanced England's knowledge of the overseas world. By Queen Elizabeth's reign and the time of Shakespeare, the framework for an imperial identity was already in place: maritime power, the quest for prestige, and a sense of Protestant destiny (Extract 2). The defeat of the Spanish naval armada, and the decline of Portuguese influence at the hands of the Dutch in the sixteenth century, provided England with opportunities for expansion.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, England's imperial activities became more systematic as chartered companies of merchant adventurers began exploiting overseas resources and, for the first time, established territorial claims (with local consent) around their small trading outposts in Asia and Africa. Many of these companies were short-lived but others, notably the East India Company (EIC) established in 1600, would become wealthy and influential (Extract 3). The EIC is a good example of a monopolistic company whose charter prohibited trading by any other organization within its huge territory in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In other parts of the empire, especially in North America and the West Indies, the Crown still controlled the framework for trade, but too many people were involved for monopolies to be enforced. The relationship between trade and settlement was also different in various parts of the early empire. The plantations of North America and the West Indies required settlement, but the fur trade of the Hudson's Bay Company could be conducted mainly through existing indigenous networks. In Asia and west Africa, too, the English did business with existing economic and political systems.

The early modern empire is often called 'mercantilist' because of the prominent role of the State in encouraging commerce for the benefit of the nation and the Crown. After the disruptions of the Civil War and Interregnum of 1642–60, one of the first acts of Charles II was to strengthen the Crown's control of imperial commerce (Extract 4). England would monopolize the transportation and importation of colonial produce through its chartered companies in the East, and the enforced use of English domestic shipping in the Atlantic, and in return overseas settlements would enjoy exclusive access to English markets and goods. The seventeenth century 'Laws of Trade', which included the new Navigation Act, codified this policy for the first time and culminated in the creation of a Board of Trade in 1696 to oversee and regulate colonial affairs.

The key was the identification of empire with the State. Imperial commerce brought revenue to the Crown and gave England exclusive access to its own supplies of valuable imports like spices, tobacco, and sugar. These imports produced customs and excise revenues, filling royal coffers depleted by war. The protectionist system also generated an immense network of patronage, allowing monarchs to reward their friends and raise additional funds. Historian Hilary Beckles explains how the West Indian colonies became the 'hub' of English trans-Atlantic commerce during this period (Extract 5).

Schemes for North American plantations also developed during Elizabethan times. In the wake of the explorations (and privateering depredations) of men like Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh, Queen Elizabeth made small but significant challenges to Spain's domination of the Americas. Under the patronage of Raleigh and others, Richard Hakluyt collected accounts of English voyages to the New World, and promoted the establishment of English settlements in North America (Extract 6). These would be plantations like the West Indian ones, and the growing of tobacco and other products would make them profitable (Extract 7). But they were also islands of English Protestantism in a New World dominated by Spanish and French Catholicism. John Smith, an early explorer of the area he named 'New England', called on his countrymen to challenge Spanish supremacy in the Americas and claimed that, by founding an empire in New England, England itself would be restored through a renewal of its spirit of Protestant enterprise and an expanding maritime trade (Extract 8).

## 1

### A Venetian

There is no surviving account by John Cabot himself about his explorations in North America. Cabot was originally from Venice, and this letter home from a Venetian in London gives one of very few descriptions of Cabot's activities; the letter was written on 23 August 1497.

That Venetian of ours who went with a small ship from Bristol to find new islands has come back and says he has discovered mainland [*terra firma*] 700 leagues away, which is the country of the Grand Khan [*Gram Cam*], and that he coasted it for 300 leagues and landed and did not see any person; but he has brought here to the king certain snares [*luzi*] which were spread to take game and a needle for making nets [*uno agoda far rede*], and he found certain notched [or felled] trees [*al'boti tajati*] so that by this he judges that there are inhabitants. Being in doubt he returned to his ship; and he has been three

months on the voyage; and this is certain. And on the way back he saw two islands, but was unwilling to land, in order not to lose time, as he was in want of provisions. The king here is much pleased at this; and he [Cabot] says that the tides are slack [*le aque è stanchi*] and do not run as they do here. The king has promised him for the spring ten armed ships as he [Cabot] desires and has given him all the prisoners to be sent away, that they may go with him, as he has requested; and has given him money that he may have a good time until then. And he is with his Venetian wife and his sons at Bristol. His name is Zuam Talbot and he is called the Great Admiral [*el gran ammirante*] and vast honour is paid to him and he goes dressed in silk, and these English run after him like mad, and indeed he can enlist as many of them as he pleases, and a number of rogues as well. The discoverer of these things planted on the land which he has found a large cross with a banner [*bandiera*] of England and one of St. Mark, as he is a Venetian, so that our flag [*confalone*] has been hoisted very far afield.

[Source: David B. Quinn, ed., *New American World: a documentary history of North America to 1612* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), vol. 1, p. 96.]

## 2

## William Shakespeare

Playwright William Shakespeare wrote this speech for the character of John of Gaunt, in *Richard II* (1597), proclaiming the English rejection of royal tyranny and England's identity as a maritime power. The speech became one of the best-known expressions of English nationalism.

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,  
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
 This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
 This fortress built by nature for herself  
 Against infection and the hand of war,  
 This happy breed of men, this little world,  
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
 Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
 Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
 Against the envy of less happier lands [. . .]

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,  
 This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,  
 Feared by their breed, and famous by their birth,  
 Renowned for their deeds as far from home,  
 For Christian service and true chivalry,  
 As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry

Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son:  
 This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land  
 Dear for her reputation through the world [. . .]

[Source: John M. Lothian, ed., William Shakespeare, *Richard II*  
 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), pp. 59–60.]

### 3 East India Company Charter

Queen Elizabeth I granted this charter to the East India Company in 1600. Note the powers of land disposal and revenue collection that were granted, and the ambitious mandate stretching from Asia and Africa across the Pacific. The EIC was never able to exploit such an extensive monopoly and would concentrate its activities on south and south-east Asia.

We greatly tendering the Honour of our Nation, the Wealth of our People, and the Encouragement of them, and others of our loving Subjects in their good Enterprizes, for the Increase of our Navigation, and the Advancement of lawful Traffick, to the Benefit of our Common Wealth, . . . go give and grant unto our said loving Subjects, . . . That they and every of them from henceforth be, and shall be one Body Corporate and Politick, in Deed and in Name, by the Name of *The Governor and Company of Merchants of London, Trading into the East-Indies*, . . . capable in Law to have, purchase, . . . and retain, Lands, Rents, Priviledges, Liberties, Jurisdictions, Franchises and Hereditaments of whatsoever Kind, Nature and Quality so ever they be . . . And also to give . . . and dispose Lands . . . and to do and execute all and singular other Things. [. . .]

And further, all such the Apprentices, Factors, or Servants of them and of every of them, which hereafter shall be employed, by The Said *Governor and Company*, in the said Trade of Merchandize, of or to the *East-Indies*, beyond the Seas, or any other the Places aforesaid, in any Part of the said East-Indies, or other the Places aforesaid, shall and may, by the Space of Fifteen Years, from the Feast of the Birth of our Lord God last past, before the Date thereof, freely traffick and use the Trade of Merchandize, by Seas, in and by such Ways and Passages already found out and discovered, or which hereafter shall be found out and discovered, as they shall esteem and take to be fittest, into and from the said East-Indies, in the Countries and Parts of Asia and Africa, and into and from all the Islands, Ports, Havens, Cities, Creeks, Towns, and Places in Asia and Africa, and America, or any of them, beyond the Cape of Bona Esperanza [*Good Hope*] to the Streights of Magellan, where any Trade or Traffick of Merchandize may be used or had, and to and from every of them. [. . .]

And by virtue of our Prerogative Royal, which we will not in that Behalf have argued, or brought in Question, we straitly charge, command and prohibit . . . all the Subjects of us . . . that none of them, directly or indirectly, do visit, haunt, frequent or trade, traffick or adventure, by way of Merchandize, into or from any of the said East-Indies, or into or from any the Islands, Ports, Havens, Cities, Towns or Places aforesaid, other than The said Governor and Company . . . and such particular Persons as now be, or hereafter shall be of that Company, their Agents, Factors and Assigns, during the said Term of Fifteen Years, unless it be by and with such Licence and Agreement of the said Governor and Company.

[Source: A. F. Madden and D. K. Fieldhouse, eds, *The Empire of the Bretaignes*, 1175–1688: *The Foundations of a Colonial System of Government*, vol. 1 of *Select documents on the constitutional history of the British Empire and Commonwealth* (hereafter *SDBE*) (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 234, 235–6, 237.]

## 4 Navigation Act 1660

The *Navigation Act* of 1660 revived and reinforced earlier Acts designed to promote English commerce and to protect it from competition with other European countries.

*For the increase of shipping and encouragement of the navigation of this nation, wherein, under the good providence and protection of God, the wealth, safety and strength of this kingdom is so much concerned:* Be it enacted that . . . no goods or commodities whatsoever shall be imported into or exported out of any lands, islands, plantations or territories to his Majesty belonging or in his possession, or which may hereafter belong unto or be in the possession, of his Majesty, his heirs and successors, in Asia, Africa or America in any other ship or ships, vessel or vessels whatsoever, but in such ships or vessels as do truly and without fraud belong only to the people of England or Ireland, dominion of Wales or town of Berwick upon Tweed, or are of the built of and belonging to any the said lands, islands, plantations or territories, as the proprietors and right owners thereof, and whereof the master and three fourths of the mariners at least are English. [. . .]

And it is further enacted . . . That no goods or commodities whatsoever, of the growth or manufacture of Africa, Asia, America, or of any part thereof, or which are described or laid down in the usual maps or cards of those places, be imported into England, Ireland, or Wales, islands of Guernsey and Jersey, or town of Berwick upon Tweed, in any other ship or ships, vessel or vessels whatsoever, but in such as do truly and without fraud belong only to the people of England or Ireland, dominion of Wales, or town of Berwick

upon Tweed or of the lands, islands, plantations or territories in Asia, Africa or America, to his Majesty belonging, as the proprietors and right owners thereof, and whereof the master, and three fourths at least of the mariners are *English* . . . [. . .]

No sugars, tobacco, cotton wool, indicoes, ginger fustick, or other dying wood, of the growth, production or manufacture of any English plantation in America, Asia or Africa, shall be shipped, carried, conveyed or transported from any of the said English plantations to any land, island, territory, dominion, port or place whatsoever, other than to such other English plantations as do belong to his Majesty, his heirs and successors, or to the Kingdom of England, or Ireland, or principality of Wales, or town of Berwick upon Tweed, there to be laid on shore . . . [. . .]

[Source: Madden and Fieldhouse, *Empire of the Bretaignes*, pp. 386–9.]

## 5 Hilary McD. Beckles

Eric Williams, the historian who became the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, described the West Indian islands as ‘the hub of Empire’. Certainly by the end of the seventeenth century commentators on Empire such as Charles Davenant, Josiah Child, and Dalby Thomas judged the West Indian islands to be Britain’s most profitable overseas investment. Eighteenth-century analysts of colonial trade and economic growth developed this argument in relation to profitability in the sugar plantation economy. For Adam Smith, the place of sugar among colonial produce was clear: ‘the profits of a sugar plantation in any of our West Indian colonies are generally much greater than those of any other cultivation that is known either in Europe or America’. ‘The Sugar colonies’, noted Arthur Young, ‘added above three million [pounds] a year to the wealth of Britain.’ In our own time, however, there has been widespread agreement that the sugar colonies were dismal social failures.

In 1600 England’s interests in these ‘small scraps of land’ seemed ‘more an opposition program’ characterized by erratic, but violent, assault upon Spanish settlements and trade than the projection of a clearly defined policy of colonization. Raiding and plundering became the norm, and represented what seemed to be the extent of English capabilities, attracting considerable capital from the investing community. English merchants thus proved themselves ready to invest in long-distance projects, even in politically volatile areas, once the returns were good.

During the twenty years of war with Spain, 1585–1604, there was ‘no peace

beyond the line', and the value of prize money brought to England from the Caribbean ranged between £100,000 and £200,000 per year. Privateering, linked directly to contraband trades, continued to be important well into the century. It had an impact on everyday life in Jamaica (which came into English possession following Cromwell's Western Design of 1655–56 on Spanish possessions in the West Indies), especially as returns contributed to local financing of the agricultural economy. The Elizabethan state, for tactical political reasons, had not wished publicly to support such Caribbean operations, but individual adventurers were confident that they had the means to solve any problem which might be encountered in the Americas, and they could call on financially experienced courtiers and gentlemen to organize and invest in these ventures.

In these approaches to colonization, the English followed the Dutch, who had formulated ground-plans to trade and settle in the Caribbean. The Guiana coasts, located between Spanish settlements on the Orinoco and Portuguese possessions on the Amazon, attracted English as well as Dutch attention. In 1604, nine years after Raleigh's effort, Charles Leigh attempted a settlement on the Wiapoco. There were others: Harcourt's attempt (1609–13), Raleigh's (1617–18), and Roger North's (1619–21). An important outcome of these operations was the opportunity to survey the Windward and Leeward Islands, which the Spanish had left neglected and undefended.

The Spanish had attached little economic value to the Lesser Antilles because the islands could not yield large quantities of precious metals, and the English who first became involved in individual islands also encountered determined opposition from the Kalinagos (Caribs) similar to that which had discouraged the Spaniards. The turning-point was Thomas Warner's visit to St Christopher (St Kitts) in 1622. Warner was a participant in North's Guiana project, and considered St Christopher ideally suited for the establishment of tobacco plantations. A group of mariners, led by John Powell, touched at Barbados in 1625 *en route* from the Guianas, and made similar observations. Warner and Powell returned to England to seek financial backing for a novel type of English colonizing activity [. . .].

Failed attempts at a Guiana settlement marked the beginning of a new approach by England to Caribbean colonization. The financial collapse of the Virginia Company in 1624 had resulted in a management takeover by the Crown which signalled a greater determination to convert commercial enterprises into permanent settlement. The furthering of agricultural settlements financed by joint-stock companies, syndicates, and individuals symbolized the beginning of a conceptual triumph over the long-standing tradition of piracy. At the same time, it brought to the centre of the colonizing mission powerful groups of nobles and gentry who saw this as a new arena in which to compete for royal patronage, and some became participants in a 'patent war' for control of overseas territories. For example, on



2 July 1625 James Hay, Earl of Carlisle, was issued a grant by Charles I of the 'Caribbean Islands', and on 25 February 1628 the Earl of Pembroke obtained a grant from the King for the same territories. A violent and bloody struggle ensued between settlement parties despatched to the islands by both nobles, and it was only further royal intervention which settled the conflict in favour of Carlisle.

In the next decade the Caribbean islands experienced a veritable 'swarming of the English' as more settlers established themselves in the West Indies than in any single mainland colony. This was in spite of the political and constitutional chaos which resulted from clashes between rival patents. What survived these conflicts, significantly, were the three principles that constituted the legacy of the failed Virginia Company: the option of a permanently settled community; the production for export of agricultural crops; and the idea that propertied Englishmen in far-flung colonies had an inalienable right to self-government. The aggressive promotion and defence of this legacy made the islands a place which held out greater prospects of glamour, excitement, danger, and quick profit than any mainland colony.

Given the opportunity, these earliest English colonial sponsors would probably have followed their Spanish enemies into establishing some sort of feudal system, by subjecting the aboriginal population and establishing themselves as lords living on tributes, as they preferred the search for gold and silver to agricultural production for the export trade. By the 1620s these opportunities were no longer available. Hopes of easy gold and the myth of Raleigh's El Dorado had subsided. It was clear that successful colonization in the Caribbean would be based on agriculture and trade.

The English established colonies at St Christopher in 1624, Barbados in 1627, Nevis in 1628, and Montserrat and Antigua in 1632. Previous to the campaign of 1655–56, when Oliver Cromwell added Jamaica to the list of English possessions, these small islands were the backbone of England's seaborne Empire, and the primary location of capital accumulation in the Americas. The economic importance of these islands far surpassed that of Puritan New England, but that is not to say that Puritans were not interested in the West Indies. Individual Puritans, including members of the prominent Winthrop and Downing families, spent some time in the West Indies, but collectively Puritans never attained the political power necessary to promote the West Indies as a location for New Jerusalem evangelism. Even at Providence Island, off the coast of Nicaragua, where they financed a settlement and secured political control, the culture of piracy and smuggling, as well as cruel exploitation of unfree labour, transcended considerations of building a religious utopia and rendered their community indistinguishable from those of other European settlers in neighbouring islands.

By 1640 the English had gained a demographic advantage in the Caribbean over other European nations. The islands attracted more settlers than main-

land colonies up to 1660, which suggests that they were perceived as the destinations that held the best prospects for material and social advancement. The white population grew rapidly up to about 1660 when it reached 47,000, constituting some 40 per cent of all the whites in Britain's transatlantic colonies. Gemery's estimates suggest that of the total of 378,000 white emigrants to America between 1630 and 1700, 223,000 (about 60 per cent) went to the colonies in the wider Caribbean.

Economic depression and political turmoil of the 1620s and early 1630s, and the effective marketing of the colonies as places of opportunity for all classes, constituted a winning formula for pro-emigration agents. The population of Barbados in particular rose sharply during the 1630s, advancing sevenfold between 1635 and 1639. No other colony rivalled Barbados as a destination for settlers during this period. The West Indies also forged ahead of the mainland colonies in the expansion of economic activities. Investment and trade increased in direct relation to population growth, and West Indian capitalists were able to secure in the early years the greater share of labourers leaving both Ireland and Britain for America.

The organization of staple production—tobacco and cotton—in the formative years depended upon the labour of thousands of British indentured labourers. Unlike the islands acquired by the Spanish in the Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles lacked a large indigenous population which could be reduced to servitude. In the absence of a native labour force such as had been exploited by the Spaniards in Mexico and Peru, the obvious alternative supply of workers was found through the importation of indentured servants. This meant—as it also did in the Chesapeake—that the producer who commanded most servants was the individual most likely to succeed. [. . .]

Reports from the West Indies during the second half of the century indicate the steady advance of sugar cultivation, although sugar monoculture was certainly not the case in these islands. Contests for the best lands in Jamaica between sugar farmers, cash-crop producers, and cattlemen remained as intense as that between agriculturalists and contraband traders for control of official policy with respect to the colony's development. Piracy and contraband also remained attractive in Jamaica as a means of wealth accumulation, despite the ascendancy of the agricultural trades which the mercantilist intellectuals considered to be the only sustainable source of wealth. The cultivation of cacao, which had been pursued on Jamaica by the Spaniards, was persisted in by some English planters, and it was the profits made from cacao that made it possible for some of them to become involved with sugar production. Efforts were also made to cultivate sugar on the four Leeward islands of Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, and St Christopher, but none of these became a major sugar producer in the seventeenth century despite the fact that the planters in all these areas were lured by the Barbados model. Less suitable agricultural terrain, and the high cost of constructing the mill,

the boiling house, and the curing house that was necessary on every sugar plantation, go some way towards explaining the limited advance of sugar production into the Lesser Antilles. The more weighty disincentive, however, would have been the close location of these islands to the Caribbean settlements of other European powers. Their consequent exposure to attack by European rivals made them altogether more risky places for the high capital investment that sugar required than Barbados and Jamaica. Instead of the monocrop production of sugar that came to characterize Barbados after the 1650s, the Lesser Antilles persisted with more mixed economic activity that included the production of indigo, tobacco, ginger, cotton, domesticated cattle, and fish as well as sugar.

The reorganization of economic activity in Barbados and the Leewards is generally referred to as 'The Sugar Revolution'. The cultivation of sugar cane on large plantations on Barbados steadily displaced the growing of tobacco, cotton, and indigo on smaller farms, and supplemented these activities on the other islands. Sugar planting, with its larger labour- and capital-equipment needs, stimulated demand for bigger units. Landowners enclosed on tenants, and small freeholders were bought out, and pushed off. As a result, land prices escalated and there was a rapid reduction in the size and output of non-sugar producers. In most islands some small-scale farmers continued to occupy prime lands, maintaining a cash-crop culture on the margins of plantations. But small farmers found it difficult to compete as tobacco and cotton prices fell and their operations often proved unprofitable. By the 1680s the 'sugar islands' had lost their reputation as hospitable places for propertyless European migrants, while the progress of sugar cultivation on the island of Barbados effected a more rapid and more total manipulation of the natural environment than occurred anywhere else in the Atlantic that came under English control during the course of the seventeenth century. [. . .]

Englishmen had entered the Caribbean rather tentatively, but by the beginning of the eighteenth century they were confident and in effective control. The first enemy, the Spanish, had early become reconciled to the English presence in the Lesser Antilles, and later surrendered Jamaica without much of a fight. The Dutch had consolidated a considerable commercial empire after 1621, when their West India Company was formed and 'parented' pioneering English settlers. By 1650 the English, now feeling secure and ambitious, bit the Dutch hand that had fed them, first in 1652–54 and then in a series of trade wars in 1665–67 and 1672–74. Turning to the French, the English assaulted settlers and harassed traders in the wars of 1666–67 and 1689–97. Finally, in 1713 they succeeded in crushing French resistance and captured the prime prize: the *Asiento* contract to supply slaves to the Spanish colonies.

The English developed the islands as major economies in their own right, but also as part of the Atlantic trading system. The islands were valuable to