COLONIALISM AND DEVELOPMENT

Britain and its Tropical Colonies 1850-1960

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and
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For my wife, Kate

M.H.

For my parents, William and Edith

D.M.

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Preface

Now that Third World development problems have become such a universal concern and have assumed such an alarming aspect, there is a tendency to look back to the colonial period with renewed interest in the hope that it may shed some light on the nature of the development problem or alternatively be made the scapegoat for current difficulties. It can be argued that if the colonial powers had been more successful in developing the economic and political structures of their colonies, contemporary problems would be less severe and intractable. Conversely, others would claim that the legacy from the colonial period can be overestimated; that it occurred too long ago to have had any very powerful influence on current problems—which stem rather from the inequality and instability of the world's trading economy and the failure of developing countries to adjust adequately to the responsibilities of independence, than to any alleged shortcomings in colonial rule. Indeed it might be argued that the conditions of relative peace and stability which prevailed in much of the colonial period were more conducive to development than the instability and uncertainty which has afflicted the Third World since the 1960s. These matters are highly controversial and will no doubt always remain so. They have already generated a vast polemical literature, and it is not our intention to add to it. Instead we hope that by attempting an analysis of the aims, activities, achievements and shortcomings of one major colonial power (Great Britain) in its tropical colonies over a period of a little over a century, we may be able to bring into sharper focus the specific problems and obstacles to development as they unfolded; and to assess the usefulness, or otherwise, of policy decisions and initiatives as they were taken.

Such an aim may perhaps be considered modest in relation to modern development problems, but analysing and absorbing the lessons of history is never a simple process; and one of the more distressing aspects of contemporary Third World experience has been a tendency to repeat mistakes previously made through an inadequate knowledge and understanding of past activities. If we can lessen that danger, and can highlight some of the achievements and shortcomings of past performance, we might be able to help clarify the planning agenda which developing countries need to elaborate, and to help to set it more firmly in the context of previously hard-won experience.

Despite many studies of British imperialism (the most important of which are discussed in what follows) there is still a gap in the literature concerning the long-range development of the tropical colonies during the colonial period (or at any rate from the mid-nineteenth century). It is this gap which we attempt to fill. The official and unofficial sources are voluminous and there is no way in which every relevant source could have been consulted. We have concentrated on a range which seemed the most useful for our purposes, which is a mixture drawn in the main from official government archives, contemporary accounts, official trade statistics and government publications. We have analysed the official trade statistics in some detail, using the records from the colonial customs offices, as printed in the annual governors' reports, or the Blue Books, and cited the reports themselves. We have also used original material from the Colonial Office, the Board of Trade, the War Office, the Foreign Office, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office in the Public Record Office; and a wide range of official publications and reports relating to colonial affairs.

In addition, we have sought to illuminate the picture by citing contemporary accounts of the colonies such as Anthony Trollope's travels in the West Indies in 1859 and accounts of East Africa, *c.* 1905, by Sir Harry Johnston and Sir Charles Eliot. We are conscious that much more could have been done in this respect, but limitations of space curtailed what was possible. We are also aware that our sources tend to bias our account towards the official British version. This is unfortunate, but in the present state of knowledge, more or less inevitable. We are sure that more research will be carried out in the future by historians in the former colonies, which will illuminate the economic impact of imperialism from a local perspective, leading eventually to a more balanced assessment of British colonial rule.

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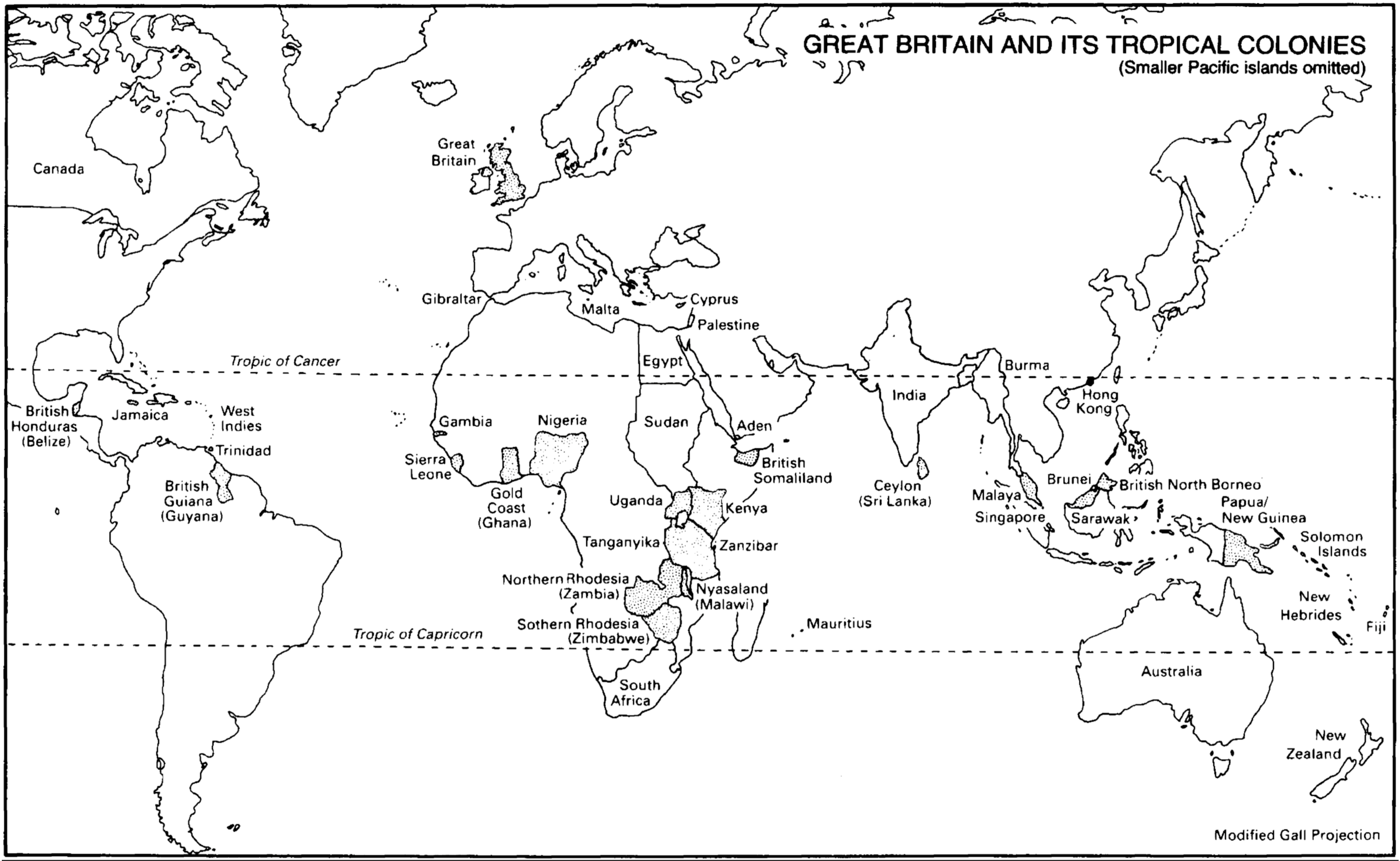

Modified Gall projection. Equatorial scale 1:110,000,000.

1

Introduction and framework

THE DEVELOPMENT PROBLEM IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The basis of our approach stems from an examination of the plans for colonial development which were gradually evolved by British statesmen and administrators from the late nineteenth century onwards. For although Britain may have started with a fairly laissez-faire attitude to the economic progress of its colonies, increasingly from the 1880s onwards, the need for positive plans was realised. At first these remained general and poorly articulated, but as experience grew, refinements were added, until by the 1920s quite ambitious and far-reaching plans for colonial economic development had been framed. No doubt by modern standards they were too partial and limited. Nonetheless they far exceeded the performance on the ground. It is in the analysis of the way in which these plans evolved, and the reasons why they failed to achieve more than a relatively small part of their objectives, that we believe that much of the interest in the present study lies.

The two sides to this evolution affected theory and practice. Initially the way in which the plans grew and were changed illustrates the way in which the actual course of development and the obstacles to it, influenced the growth of theory and led to its ever-growing elaboration. It also reveals how the limited intellectual horizons and prejudices of past periods affected the development of thinking and hampered action. But, although this development of theory is of considerable interest it is of less importance than the second aspect, which concentrates attention on the specific achievements and failures of policy in the different countries concerned, and seeks to assess how this has affected their current development situation. This analysis tends to place much more emphasis on things that were not done (perhaps especially the failure to provide more than a rudimentary infrastructure, and to make more than derisory progress with industrialisation) than it does on criticism of specific initiatives, though there were of course some glaring examples of these—such as the misconceived groundnut scheme in Tanganyika in the early 1950s and the lesser known, but equally disastrous, Gambian egg scheme of the late 1940s.[1]

It may be objected at this point that it would have been unrealistic to expect any balanced development under conditions of imperial control, and by extension, under the conditions of so-called ‘neo-colonialism’ which have succeeded it. It can be argued that, although formal colonial rule has ended, the dominance which the developed countries, with their world-wide multinational companies, have on the international economy is such that they will never permit more than an unbalanced development in Third World countries. This would enable the developed countries to extract food and raw materials cheaply, and to sell some surplus production in Third World markets, but would not allow the development of competing industries or trade and financial networks. There is clearly much force in this argument and it would be foolish to deny the strength of vested interests in the international economy, but at the same time to give too much weight to such a proposition also has its dangers, since it consigns all hope of development to some far off date when the developed world may have changed its character; and it has the effect of demoralising development initiatives in the Third World. In fact the recent economic history of Europe has shown that trade between industrialised countries grows more quickly than trade between industrial and non-industrial countries, because of the general widening and deepening of the market which comes from greater all-round prosperity; and there seems no good reason for believing that what applies to intra-European trade would not apply equally well to world-wide trade. It is true that breaking out of their relative dependence will not be easy for Third World countries, and will involve a much greater degree of economic cooperation and mutual assistance than they have hitherto been able to achieve; but the advances which the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) were able to make in the 1970s (while admittedly exceptional) perhaps indicate that there is more scope for cooperative progress than has hitherto been realised. Even if this scenario seems too optimistic it is well to reflect that a century ago Japan was regarded as a poorly developed country, not well endowed with natural resources. Yet it is amazing what organisation, national independence, and determination can achieve. To sum up this line of argument, we are not suggesting that world conditions make Third World development easy or simple; but merely that history suggests that even under the relatively unfavourable conditions of colonial control quite a lot of development (admittedly unbalanced) was achieved, and that it is not helpful to exaggerate the importance of negative factors.

It is also important to remember that a great deal of development commences by its very nature from an initial unbalanced concentration on one product (often a staple export) and that this can continue for a long time before a more balanced development begins. Australia provides one of many examples. Between 1820 and 1930 it relied overwhelmingly on the export of wool (and to lesser extent gold and wheat) to generate its economic growth. Some significant, but still small, progress towards industrial development and 'balanced' growth occurred between 1860 and 1930, but it was not until the late 1930s that really significant structural change and diversification took place. It is true that conditions in the self-governing Australian settler colonies were very different from those in the dependent tropical colonies, but the lesson that a country can escape from over-dependence on one staple export is still valid.[2]

To return to the aims of the present study, it may be useful to explain more clearly what we mean by 'tropical colonies' and what are the geographical limitations involved in this definition. Initially it seemed an attractive idea to try to comprise the whole of British imperial experience in the study, but we soon realised that this was impractical for a variety of reasons. In the first place the experience of the settlement colonies (later to become dominions) of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa was so fundamentally different from that of the other parts of the empire that their inclusion would have contributed little to our central concerns, quite apart from the problems that would have arisen from expanding the scope of the study beyond what could be sensibly covered in one book. To some extent similar considerations applied to India. In a sense the inclusion of India would have been desirable. Much of it is tropical, and it was sometimes used as an experimental laboratory for policies later to be tried out elsewhere in the colonial empire. On the other hand, the Indian Empire was always a separate organisation with its own ethos and traditions, and with an exclusive civil service whose members were not normally employed elsewhere in the colonial empire; so that the spin-off from their experience was limited. This factor, coupled with the immense amount of space which would have had to have been accorded to India (at the expense of the Colonial Office's tropical colonies) made us decide reluctantly to leave India out, except where the transfer of specific experiments from India called for discussion.

Essentially, we decided that more than enough material was available for our purposes from the large number of colonies that were under the direct control of the Colonial Office; and for this reason two African colonies not administered by the Colonial Office were also excluded. These were Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia) a settlement colony administered by the British South Africa Company; and the Sudan (formerly the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan) a condominium jointly administered by the British Foreign Office and the Egyptian government.

At this stage it will also help to clarify our aims if we allude to some of the interesting issues connected with British imperialism which we do not attempt to address, except in passing. Recently much interest has been shown in the question of the costs and benefits of imperialism to Britain,[3] especially since the publication in 1986 of the pioneering work of Lance Davis and Robert Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Political Economy of British Imperialism, 1860–1912.* This massive study of British investment in the empire of course throws up many fascinating problems relating to development in the colonies, but these aspects are not central to the authors' aims. They specifically state that they have made no attempt to measure the economic, social or psychological effects of imperialism on the inhabitants of the colonies, which is one of our principal aims.[4] Instead they are centrally concerned with the economic effects of the empire on Britain. We thus regard their study as complementary to ours, while remaining somewhat sceptical of their conclusion that Britain contributed more to the empire than vice versa. In a penetrating review of *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire,* Andrew Porter has noted that they regarded trade 'as not of overwhelming significance' (p.190) for their analysis, whereas we share his view that it is one of the main reasons for imperial expansion.[5] However, their new estimates of British imperial investment, based on the analysis of the accounts of 482 companies, refines previous estimates, even though they ignore direct investment through investment groups.[6]

Decolonisation is another topic which has attracted a good deal of research recently, and which obviously had an economic dimension, but which we do not discuss in any detail, since it is essentially outside the scope of our study.[7]

Moreover, we could not, for reasons of space, have attempted to write a detailed economic history of each colony. A few, like Nigeria, Kenya and Malaya, have been reasonably well researched, but many others have not, partly because until recently the colonial period was, understandably, not a major historical research priority for post-independence scholars.[8] Above all, our book is concerned with government colonial development policy and practice, because only the government was in a position to formulate, inspire and direct development policy, even if it relied to a considerable, but gradually decreasing, extent on private enterprise for much of its implementation.

Like all historical researchers we rely heavily on the existing literature on the subject for the foundation on which we seek to build. A few examples are the classics by the early pro-consuls, such as Sir Harry Johnston's, *The Opening Up of Africa* (1911), Sir Frederick (later Lord) Lugard's immensely influential *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922) which argued that Britain had a duty to develop the tropics, not just for its sake or theirs, but for the benefit of the whole world; and Sir Frank Swettenham's, *British*

Malaya, an Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya (1906); and of course many more.

Recent scholarship has much refined these pioneering (and not by any means unself-interested) accounts. Of the many popular histories of the British Empire, Bernard Porter's, *The Lion's Share, a short History of British imperialism, 1850–1970* (1975), is one of the best and most entertaining. A major re-interpretation of imperial history has recently been undertaken by Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins in two seminal articles in the *Economic History Review,* of which the second, 'Gentlemenly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas II: New Imperialism, 1850–1945' (1987) refers to our period.[9] Their emphasis is however different from ours, in that they are primarily concerned with British motives for imperial expansion and the empire's effect on Britain. This is naturally an oversimplification of a complex argument, which will be elaborated in a two-volume study to be published in 1993 entitled *British Imperialism: A Re-interpretation,* which promises to be a major landmark, not only in imperial, but in British history as well. Unfortunately it was not available for us to consult.

Of recent works which touch more closely on the history and development of the tropical colonies, particularly in the later colonial period, mention must be made of Stephen Constantine's, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy, 1914 to 1940* (1984) which is a very useful study, and the two volumes of documents, *British Imperial Policy and Decolonisation, 1938–64* (1987 and 1989)) edited by Andrew Porter and A.J.Stockwell, which is essential for the post-war period in particular. Perhaps the most valuable of all for our purposes though, is David J. Morgan's five volume, *Official History of Colonial Development,* which covers the period 1925 to 1971, drawing on the Colonial Office's and other official government sources.

It is necessary at this point to define what is meant by 'development'. Many treatises have been written on this subject, and social scientists are by no means fully agreed on every aspect. However, certain characteristics are generally agreed. There should be a rise in average living standards which involves not merely an increase in material goods, but an enlargement of social and cultural opportunities and widespread access to education, health and recreational facilities. As a starting point this will involve economic growth, but this must take the form not merely of an increase in national production, but of increased production per head of population. Economic growth which merely keeps pace with population growth, or worse still, falls behind it, can of course make little contribution to development. There is a further problem with economic growth. It is normally measured as gross national product (GNP) or gross national income (GNI) using methods of national accounting which were invented for developed countries. Essentially these techniques measure commercial transactions, and it is well known that they are not very appropriate for underdeveloped areas with large subsistence, or non-market sectors. This was a problem throughout the colonial period, and we have frequently had to fall back on the growth of foreign trade as the only available (and not very reliable) proxy for economic growth. A further problem is that national accounting techniques do not always take proper account of environmental damage, resource depletion and pollution, which often accompany the cruder forms of economic growth, and need somehow to be offset against it.

It is sometimes assumed that economic growth will inevitably be overtaken by an expanding population, and although this is an obvious danger, there is no reason why population growth should outstrip economic growth. In fact, in many of Britain's tropical colonies the major problem was shortage of people, especially in Africa, and increasing populations from the 1950s onwards provided both the means as well as the need for accelerated development.

Another weakness with conventional measurements of GNP or GNI is that they measure averages for the whole population, which can sometimes conceal wide gaps in income distribution between the very wealthy and poorer groups who were becoming increasingly proletarianised by the drift to the towns which typically accompanied the break-up of traditional agrarian societies. Some colonial societies had what might be described as almost a 'feudal' income distribution pattern which was not necessarily altered by economic growth, at least not in its early stages. In addition some leakage of wealth out of the colonies to the 'mother country' was inevitable, so that in many cases the principal beneficiaries of more rapid economic growth were traditional rulers plus British shareholders and, possibly, British workers. Income distribution cannot be measured in any exact way for the colonies, but it is important to note that the quickening of economic activity which was visible in most of the colonies at various times did not automatically mean that incomes per head were rising for the majority of the population. Such a situation depended on their degree of participation in the growing parts of the economy, whether as entrepreneurs, 'peasant' producers or merely as wage labourers. It also depended on the extent to which some of the new wealth (usually in the form of enhanced customs duties) was translated into social and welfare services, such as hospitals, electricity supplies, piped water and drainage and, above all, schools, since education rapidly became a major ambition of colonial peoples. This was in general a slow and incomplete process. Acceptance by Britain that it had an obligation to provide welfare services came about only gradually, and even then local funding of such services remained dominant.

Beyond all this, however, is the vital question of structural change in the colonial economies. Economic growth tended to lead (inevitably to begin with) to a dependence on a narrow range of unprocessed primary exports and, indeed, prior to the First World War, this was a rational way for the undeveloped tropical colonies to integrate into the world economy, especially given their ties to Britain. The very success of reaching this initial level of economic development led the colonies to get stuck in a rut for the next few decades or even to the end of the colonial epoch. Yet 'development' had to include the stimulation of a diversity of industries and occupations for the colonial inhabitants, the growth of a buoyant domestic market for locally made products as well as imports, rises in the productivity of traditional agriculture, shifts of labour and capital from (low productivity) agriculture into (higher productivity) manufacturing and services, the transformation of traditional handicraft industries towards mechanised ones and the establishment of conditions for mass consumption including adequate infrastructure for domestic distribution and marketing. The transformation of a undeveloped economy to an industrial one is a long drawn out process lasting, in Britain's case, for several centuries, and even in Japan's case, it took nearly a century from the 1860s. There were also service industries—tourism, entrepôt facilities, communications—where the colonial economies could diversify. At the time when they were integrated into the world economy the tropical colonies might have seemed to have possessed a comparative advantage only in producing primary products. They undoubtedly did have a comparative advantage in producing some tropical agricultural commodities and minerals, and they were no doubt wise to base their economic progress on maintaining and intensifying this position. Comparative advantage, however, is not static: government and private capital (guided by government, perhaps) often act to alter comparative advantage. State assistance to economic development was normal in the economic history of the developed nations of today, Britain included. Although the period of colonial rule was generally less than 100 years, it was long enough for British colonial policy to have had a major impact on economic development and it is not unreasonable to expect the colonial regime to have played a significant role in this sense. How and to what extent this was tackled remains a major topic of this book.

We must turn now from these general issues to a brief survey of the far-flung and heterogeneous group of territories that made up Britain's empire in the tropics.[10]

THE TROPICAL COLONIES

Britain eventually came to possess colonies in every part of the tropics, extending from the old colonies in the Caribbean, through Africa to Asia and across large stretches of the Pacific Ocean. Their area, population, density, approximate land use and capital cities are summarised (*c.* 1956) in Table 1.1. This was the period when the colonial empire was at its maximum extent, just prior to its dissolution (though Sri Lanka (Ceylon) had already achieved independence in 1948). The tropical colonies comprised some 1.8 million square miles (compared with Great Britain's 94,000) and had a population in 1956 of about 87.7 million (compared with Great Britain's 50.2 million). But although this was, in Joseph Chamberlain's words, an immense 'estate' for Britain to administer, it was far from conveniently located or rationally laid out. Instead it was an incredibly varied group of countries strung around the globe with representatives in every continent. The distances from London are immense. Going west it is 4,700 miles to Jamaica. Southwards to Nigeria in West Africa is 3,000 miles, and to Zambia in southern Africa is 4,800 miles. Going southeastwards to Asia via East Africa the distances are as follows: to Kenya 4,250 miles, to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) 5,430 miles, to Malaya 6,700 miles and to the Solomon Islands in the Pacific Ocean about 12,000 miles. Distant Fiji and the remote Kiribati and Tuvalu (Gilbert and Ellice) Islands in the Pacific Ocean are actually slightly closer, at about 11,000 miles when approached from the west through the Panama Canal. In 1956 a boat from London to Suva in the Fijian Islands took about 35 days; in the nineteenth century it was considerably longer.

There is also a vast variety in size and importance between the different colonies, as can be seen in Table 1.2 where the 16 most important (comprising 84 million people, or 96 per cent of the total) are grouped in rank order according to the size of their population (c. 1956). We could place the 16 in four divisions, similar to a football league. In the first division Nigeria would reign supreme and alone, with its 31.2 million people it was about four times as populous as the leaders of the second division, Tanganyika and Ceylon. In addition to its large population Nigeria was also important in the international economy, being one of the world's largest suppliers of groundnuts, palm oil, palm kernel nuts and cocoa, as well as being a substantial producer of cotton, hardwoods and tobacco. This was of course before petroleum oils had been discovered in economically viable quantities.

The second division was dominated by East Africa and Asia. Britain had been trying to federate the three contiguous East African colonies of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika since 1929. In the 1950s some progress was being made, and, they had (with Zanzibar) a combined population of just under 20 million; and had this federation been successfully achieved (it fell apart in the 1960s) the new country would have moved into the first division. The East African grouping appeared to have considerable economic advantages. Uganda was a major cotton producer and had hydro-electric power from the Falls on the Nile at Jinja. Tanganyika admittedly was poor in natural resources and extent of development; but Kenya was

Table 1.1 British tropical colonies (and Sri Lanka) *c.* 1956: area, population, land use and capital city (in rank order of population, by region)

	Area (sq. miles)[a]	Population (to nearest 1,000)	Density (per sq. mile)	Approximate land use (%)				Capital city
				Arable and Orchard	Permanent grassland	Forest and woodland	'Waste' (city areas, 'bush fallow', water, etc.	
AFRICA								
West Africa								
Nigeria	373,250	31,170,000	84	23.1	–	32.0	44.8	Lagos
Gold Coast (Ghana)	91,843	4,118,000	45	22.3	–	63.9	13.8	Accra
Sierra Leone	27,925	2,100,000	75	50.7	30.4	4.2	14.8	Freetown
Gambia	4,003	277,000	69	21.4	–	29.8	49.2	Bathurst (Banjul)
East Africa								
Tanganyika (Tanzania)	342,706	8,196,000	25	11.5	16.0	38.3	34.2	Dar-es-Salaam
Kenya	219,730	6,000,000	27	2.8	20.6	2.2	74.4	Nairobi
Uganda	80,292	5,425,000	68	11.7	–	7.1	81.2	Kampala
Nyasaland (Malawi)	37,374	2,545,000	68	23.0	4.7	14.2	58.0	Zomba
Northern Rhodesia (Zambia)	287,640	2,128,000	7	40.6	–	49.7	9.7	Lusaka
British Somaliland	68,000	640,000	9	0.4	48.9	46.4	4.4	Hargeisa
Zanzibar & Pemba (Tanzania)	1,020	264,000	259	51.1	8.0	0.8	40.2	Zanzibar
ASIA								
Ceylon (Sri Lanka)[b]	25,332	8,104,000	320	23.0	–	53.8	23.1	Colombo
Malaya	50,680	6,200,000	123	17.0	–	74.0	9.0	Kuala Lumpur
Singapore	280	1,467,000	5,239	21.0	–	27.0	52.0	Singapore
Total: Malaya/ Singapore	50,960	7,667,000	–	–	–	–	–	

Table 1.1 (continued)

	Area (sq. miles)[a]	Population (to nearest 1,000)	Density (per sq. mile)	Approximate land use (%)				Capital city
				Arable and Orchard	Permanent grassland	Forest and woodland	'Waste' (city areas, 'bush fallow', water, etc.	
Hong Kong	391	2,340,000	5,985	12.9	0.4	33.7	53.5	Victoria
British Borneo	79,134	1,035,000	52	17.7	0.8	74.4	7.1	
North Borneo	29,837	361,000	12	–	–	–	–	Jesselton
Brunei	2,226	60,000	27	–	–	–	–	Brunei
Sarawak	47,071	613,000	13	–	–	–	–	Kuching
Mauritius	720	539,000	749	45.7	23.6	19.4	11.3	Port Louis
Seychelles Islands	156	47,000	237	42.0	1.0	10.0	47.0	Victoria
CARIBBEAN								
West Indies Federation								
Jamaica	4,411	1,532,000	347	15.2	20.8	17.7	46.2	Kingston
Trinidad & Tobago	1,980	698,000	353	33.6	1.2	45.7	19.7	Port of Spain
Windward Islands	821	303,000	368	35.0	3.7	32.7	28.5	
Grenada	133	85,000	639	–	–	–	–	St George's
St Lucia	233	83,000	356	–	–	–	–	Castries
St Vincent	150	[a]73,000	487	–	–	–	–	Kingstown
Dominica	305	61,000	200	–	–	–	–	Roseau
Barbados	166	221,000	1,331	65.2	11.6	–	23.2	Bridgetown
Leeward Islands	438	126,000	287	34.0	10.1	12.8	43.1	
St Christopher, Nevis & Anguilla	168	49,000	292	–	–	–	–	Basseterre
Antigua, Barbuda & Redonda	171	46,000	269	–	–	–	–	St Johns
Montserrat	32	14,000	438	–	–	–	–	Plymouth

Table 1.1 (continued)

	Area (sq. miles)[a]	Population (to nearest 1,000)	Density (per sq. mile)	Approximate land use (%)				Capital city
				Arable and Orchard	Permanent grassland	Forest and woodland	'Waste' (city areas, 'bush fallow', water, etc.	
Virgin Islands	67	7,000	104	–	–	–	–	Road Town
British Guiana								
(Guyana)	83,000	474,000	6	0.6	5.0	77.0	17.4	Georgetown
Bahama Islands	4,404	85,000	19	1.2	–	25.4	73.4	Nassau
British Honduras	8,867	81,000	9	5.1	0.6	–	94.5	Belize
PACIFIC								
Fiji Islands	7,183	332,000	47	7.9	52.0	40.0	z[c]	Suva
British Pacific Islands					Not available			
British Solomon								
Islands	11,500	100,000	9					Honiara
Tonga Islands	270	56,000	207		Not available			Nuku'alofa
New Hebrides	5,700	52,000	9		Not available			Vila
(Br-Fr condominium)								
Gilbert, Ellice & misc.								
islands	369	38,000	103		Not available			Tarawa
Totals	1,819,585	87,692,000						
For comparison: UK								
England	50,327	41,148,000	817					
Scotland	30,405	5,096,000	168					
Wales	8,015	2,597,000	324	29.1	50.4	6.6	13.9	
N. Ireland	5,238	1,371,000	262					
Total	93,985	50,212,000						

[a] 1 sq mile=2.58995 sq kilometres 640 acres and 258.9952 hectares.
[b] Independent from 1948.
[c] Included in other groups.

Table 1.2 Colonies with populations of over 0.5 million by size groups (*c.* 1956)

Number of colonies			Population (millions)
		I	
1	1.	Nigeria	31.2
		II	
	2.	Tanganyika	8.2
	3.	Ceylon	8.1
	4.	Malaya & Singapore	7.7
	5.	Kenya	6.0
	6.	Uganda	5.4
6	7.	Gold Coast	4.1
		III	
	8.	Nyasaland	2.5
	9.	Hong Kong	2.3
	10.	Northern Rhodesia	2.1
	11.	Sierra Leone	2.1
	12.	Jamaica	1.5
6	13.	British Borneo	1.0
		IV	
	14.	Trinidad & Tobago	0.7
	15.	British Somaliland	0.6
3	16.	Mauritius	0.5
16			84.0[a]

[a] i.e. 96% of total population of all British tropical colonies.

an important exporter of coffee and produced a wide range of agricultural products and had made a start with industrial development. The major problem was that Kenya was still dominated politically by a small group of European settlers, entrenched in the Legislative Council; and as long as this privileged position continued, neither Uganda nor Tanganyika could be expected to cooperate wholeheartedly in the federation. Tragically, the division created then (and earlier) spilled over into the post-colonial period, and even when the issue of white domination was no longer an obstacle, these divisions, wedded to different perceptions of where their economic interests lay, combined to frustrate plans to continue the federation once independence had been achieved by the participants. The economic costs of this failure have been heavy for all three countries, but in different degrees.

Two small, but densely populated, Asian countries occupied the middle of the second division. These were Ceylon and Malaya (including

Singapore). Both were considerably more developed than any of the African colonies, with more extensive infrastructures, and with the beginnings of some industrial growth—but both were still heavily dependent on a narrow range of staple exports. In Ceylon it was tea and copra; in Malaya, tin and rubber. For tea, tin and rubber these two countries were amongst the world's most important producers.

Finally, a single West African country, the Gold Coast (shortly to become independent as Ghana in 1957) completed the second division. Ghana was at this time the most economically developed of all the West African countries (French as well as British colonies), though its export economy was overwhelmingly concentrated on cocoa beans—of which it, almost unbelievably, grew about half the quantities entering the world trade in the 1950s.

The third division consisted of colonies with small populations ranging from one to two-and-half million. Some, like Hong Kong and Jamaica, were densely populated. Others, like Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and the British territories in Borneo, were almost uninhabited over large stretches of their territory. Zambia was poorly developed agriculturally but had rich resources of copper to export, while British Borneo likewise relied on a mineral export—petroleum oil. Nyasaland (now Malawi) in Southeast Africa, and Sierra Leone in West Africa were two smallish colonies in which indigenous agriculture was fairly well developed, but which had not established any important export staples. Sierra Leone produced palm kernels on a small scale, and had recently become important for alluvial diamonds; while Malawi was a supplier of migrant labour to the Zambian copperbelt and the gold mines of South Africa.

The fourth division comprised three small colonies, one of which, British Somaliland, largely consisted of desert. Of the other two, Trinidad was important for its petroleum oil fields, and densely populated Mauritius for its exports of sugar.

The remaining tropical colonies, with only 4 per cent of the population, were mostly groups of small islands, such as the Windwards and Leewards in the West Indies, the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean, and the widely scattered coral atolls of the Pacific Ocean. Beyond a possible potential for tourism, or as military bases, or airplane refuelling depots, their scope for any kind of economic activity beyond the most basic, was severely limited; and although subsistence agriculture was often sufficiently productive to yield their inhabitants a reasonably happy lifestyle (as witness Sir Arthur Grimble's attractive picture of life in the Gilbert Islands, 1914–19)[11] geographical constraints placed firm limits on most opportunities for changing the pattern.

Another way of categorising the tropical colonies is to divide them into types based on their socio-economic structure. Thus we have the old plantation colonies, located mainly in the Caribbean, dominated by a small white-settler 'aristocracy' of plantation owners, and a large work force of ex-slaves of African descent. Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad were the largest and most important of these. Some cocoa, oranges, limes and bananas were grown for export, but in almost every case the cultivation of sugar cane dominated the economies of these islands.

Next there were the newer plantation colonies, like Mauritius and Ceylon in the Indian Ocean, Malaya and British North Borneo in Southeast Asia and a scatter of Pacific islands like the Solomons and Fiji. Their socio-economic structure was similar to the old plantation economies except that the labour force was usually of Indian (or in Malaya, partly of Chinese) origin; and considerably more capital was invested in them than in the Caribbean. In addition to plantation crops like sugar in Mauritius and Fiji, tea in Ceylon and rubber in Malaya, the export of minerals was also important, such as petroleum oil from North Borneo, and especially tin from Malaya.

Another category of colonies were those which exported cash crops grown by indigenous farmers, usually, though not always, on fairly small holdings. These were mainly in West Africa, where cocoa production was important in Ghana (formerly Gold Coast) and Nigeria. Sierra Leone and Nigeria also produced palm oil and palm kernel nuts, and Gambia and Northern Nigeria specialised in groundnuts (peanuts). Nigeria also produced cotton as did Uganda in East Africa. Minerals were also important in a few of these colonies (produced by European-owned firms) such as the tin of Nigeria, the iron ore and diamonds of Sierra Leone, and the manganese, industrial diamonds and gold of Ghana.

Finally, the last category of tropical colonies were the relatively new settler colonies in East and Central Africa, like Kenya, Nyasaland (Malawi) and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). In these places relatively large areas of the best land had been taken from the local population and 'reserved' for European settlers, who operated extensive farms, employing native labour. These farms were not exclusively devoted to export crops, though Northern Rhodesia exported tobacco, and Kenya exported coffee, tea and sisal. They relied to some extent on supplying food for the internal market, particularly for capital cities like Nairobi in Kenya and Lusaka in Northern Rhodesia. The latter city was the centre of an extensive copper mining industry (European owned) and Northern Rhodesia's economy was heavily dependent on the export of copper. (See Appendix 3 for details.)

It can be seen that the economies of Britain's tropical colonies were linked to the world economy by a relatively small group of export commodities, which were sent principally to Europe and the United States (and in much smaller quantities to India, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand). These export commodities consisted largely of agricultural raw materials, foodstuffs and minerals (both metals and non-metals).

The most important of the raw materials were rubber (mostly from Malaya) used mainly for the manufacture of automobile tyres; palm oil used in the nineteenth century for the lubrication of machinery, and subsequently for the manufacture of soap, cosmetics and associated products, and cotton for the textile industry. Less important were tobacco for cigarettes and sisal for ropes, cordage and heavy textiles.

Occupying a half-way house between raw materials and foodstuffs were the palm kernel nuts and groundnuts produced mainly in West Africa. Both the palm kernels and the groundnuts were crushed (not locally) for their high quality oils which were used for the manufacture of margarine and cosmetics, etc.; and for their residues which were used to make high-protein cake for dairy cattle. European milk production relied heavily on these products.

Amongst the foodstuffs, sugar and tropical fruits had a wide range of uses. The beverages, cocoa, coffee and tea enjoyed growing popularity. Spices like pepper, cloves (from Zanzibar) ginger and cinnamon were somewhat less important; but some of the basic tropical foodstuffs, like tea, coffee, bananas, oranges and chocolate were staples of European and American diet.

The range of mineral exports was more limited, but still important. Potentially the most important was petroleum oil, but this was not well developed in the colonial period, except in Trinidad. Much more important were tin and copper, which were widely used throughout European and American industry—tin primarily for canning, and copper for electrical wiring. Malaya, and to a lesser extent Nigeria were important sources of tin, with copper coming from Northern Rhodesia. Gold was found in various places but was only important in Ghana. The small West African colony of Sierra Leone had rich deposits of iron ore and high quality gem diamonds, both of which began to be mined in the 1930s. Coal was not abundant (or much needed in the tropics) but was mined in eastern Nigeria for the railways, and in a few other places, like Labuan in Borneo.

All the products of the tropical colonies shared one critical weakness. They were all subject to competition from other tropical (and in the case of minerals, non-tropical) countries, and in many cases were produced in relatively small quantities by thousands of producers. This led to overproduction in times of boom, and under-production in times of slump and war, with the concomitant sharp rises and falls in prices. This instability in the international markets was quickly transferred to the colonial economies, producing an unwelcome volatility, which neither they, nor Britain, could readily control.

Mining represented a particular problem, both because minerals are wasting assets, and because the sophistication of the technology involved almost always led to foreign ownership and control (not always British). This was a sensitive area for Britain where the Colonial Office was conscious of the problems, but had difficulty in establishing coherent policy.

Another problem arose from the contemporary belief, reflected by authors like Benjamin Kidd in his book *The Control of the Tropics* (1898) that the inhabitants of the tropics had *no right* to their resources, which must be developed for the use of the world as a whole (which effectively meant Europe and North America). This was still being reflected in modified form by Lord Lugard as we have previously noted, in his *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* as late as 1922, even though he cared passionately for the welfare (as he conceived it) of the tropical colonies. This ambivalence of view clearly influenced the formation of the British government's colonial policy.

Finally, it may be helpful to survey in broad terms the possible scope for development and what might reasonably have been expected in terms of the climatic, agricultural, mineral and human resources of the tropical colonies; as well as some of the more serious impediments, both natural and man-made, which frustrated progress.

POSITIVE FACTORS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Tropical climates are a mixed blessing for economic development. Lord Leverhulme once described Nigeria (*c.* 1920) as a huge natural greenhouse with free heat and water, and it is true that despite generally poor soils impoverished by leaching, tropical agriculture can be remarkably productive when the distribution of heat and rainfall is propitious. Swamps which are naturally irrigated by springs and streams can yield three crops of rice in a year; and a luxuriant variety of roots, vegetables and fruits can be grown with amazing rapidity. Things are, however, not so simple. There is also a bewildering variety of plant, animal and human diseases, some of which have recently been brought under control, such as yellow fever and, to some extent, malaria; while others like the deadly trypanosomiasis in cattle, and 'swollen shoot' in cocoa continue to wreak economic havoc on a massive scale. Moreover, substantial progress in disease control has been mainly an achievement of the period since 1945. During much of the colonial period the population of the tropical colonies (particularly in Africa) was kept well below its economic optimum by diseases, of which those which caused widespread debilitation in humans and livestock may have been even more harmful than the more widely publicised lethal ones, like yellow fever. As Pierre Gourou put it in 1966:

> the development of the tropical world has been much delayed since the industrial and scientific revolution. Progress in the conquest of infectious diseases and in the maintenance of soil fertility has been realized in the temperate zone, through the agency of research workers born and living in the temperate zone; such discoveries have been but slowly transferred to the tropical zone, because the natural conditions are there so different. Scientists of tropical origin have been rare, and those from the temperate zones have needed much time to accustom themselves to the conditions of the tropics.[12]

Nevertheless, the widespread use of quinine as an anti-malarial medicine after the 1850s, and the discovery by Ross in 1898 that malaria was spread by the *Anopheles* mosquito, and that this could be reasonably easily controlled by spraying paraffin on its freshwater breeding places, reduced the disease problem to manageable proportions, and opened up bright new possibilities for development. These were most promising in Africa and Malaya, where there was ample scope for increasing populations to be combined with abundant land—and especially where mineral exports were also available to encourage outside investment, as with tin in Malaya and Nigeria and gold in the Gold Coast, and later on, copper in Zambia.

Ironically the very sparseness of the population in so many tropical colonies, which had clearly been a cause of economic backwardness in the pre-colonial period, represented one of the most favourable elements in their growth potential; for one of the easiest ways to encourage the first steps in economic development, is to facilitate the spread of population into lands which have hitherto been more or less unoccupied. The population figures for the pre-colonial and early colonial periods are notoriously unreliable in detail, but there can be no doubting that in general pre-colonial populations were very much smaller than they later became. Rapid population expansion, rather than being a source of anxiety as today, was on the contrary welcomed; and where indigenous growth was insufficiently rapid was assisted by immigration, as with the Chinese into Malaya, the Indians into East Africa and the Lebanese (Syrians) into West Africa. This of course sowed the seeds of future trouble, but greatly assisted economic development at the time it occurred (primarily between the 1890s and 1914).

The sparse population (especially urban) and the associated lack of transport facilities and infrastructure in general, meant that most of the tropical colonies were in a situation in which the provision of even modest transport links (such as steamships on the river Niger in Nigeria, or a railway from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur and Pahang in Malaya), could yield very substantial initial dividends, especially when large areas of new country were rapidly 'opened up' to staple export crops. In effect the model of economic development that was applicable at this time was a variant of the 'staple theory' first applied to Canadian, and later to Australian, economic development.[13] Further details of the working out of this model are provided in later chapters. Here it is only the general points which need to be considered.

In the case of the tropical colonies it was apparent that the local market was too small, scattered, and poor to encourage a move away from mere subsistence production into a more sophisticated mode of production which would allow a division of labour and the associated rises in productivity and ultimately incomes per head that spring from it. In the circumstances it was necessary to find export staples which would be saleable in Europe and America, and whose proceeds could be used to finance the loans and investments needed, both to pay for the necessary infrastructure, and to expand the area from which the staples were drawn.

This, of course, is where a tropical location did prove advantageous for, generally speaking, the agricultural and forestry products which could be most easily produced in the tropics (such as palm oil, cocoa, rubber, citrus fruits and spices amongst many others) did not have temperate zone substitutes—and hence enjoyed great growth potential if only the costs of the long sea journeys to market could be lowered. Here again progress was likely to be cumulative (and was in the period up to the 1920s) since each expansion of the market for tropical produce called for larger, faster and more efficient ships (sometimes refrigerated) and with each addition of such ships, the *unit cost* of transport fell, and the resulting profits could be used to finance yet another expansion in the size and efficiency of the transport network. The fact that the extensive colonial trade routes were by and large protected by the worldwide patrols of the British navy (at least prior to 1939, with the exception of the First World War) meant also that the rate of expansion was governed purely by economic factors and was not inhibited by extraneous strategic considerations.

In these circumstances expansion could continue until overseas markets were glutted, or succeeded in producing substitutes, as continental Europe did with beet sugar in the late nineteenth century, at the expense of tropical cane sugar producers in the West Indies, Mauritius and Fiji. To some extent this problem was lessened when the staple exports were minerals. Being in the tropics obviously made no difference here, (and there were in fact very few colonial minerals which could not be found elsewhere) but even so, at important periods in their history it was difficult to find substitutes for Zambian copper or Malayan tin, and to that extent producers enjoyed some natural protection.

The other main feature of the pre-colonial economies was the pronounced shortage (amounting in some cases to virtual absence) of capital and technology. Here again injections of very small quantities initially could produce results out of all proportion to the amounts supplied. A very good example of this was the introduction of cocoa seedlings into Ghana. The initial cost of the trees (cocoa not being found indigenously in Ghana) must have been trivial, yet within a few years this tiny investment (of the 1890s) had led to the growth of million of trees and the development of a massive world-wide trade in cocoa beans. Furthermore the savings of thousands of cocoa farmers meant that Ghana was soon in a position to generate some of its own indigenous sources of capital, and to lessen its dependence on outside investment.[14]

It is true that in the backward conditions existing during the early years of colonial rule, injections of the most modern European technology would hardly have been appropriate, yet it remains the case that in principle the opportunities for the transfer of new technology were greatly enhanced by the much closer contact with Europe which colonial rule provided.[15] However in this area the development prospects were certainly more latent than actual; except in the case of railways, which were introduced fairly rapidly in the two decades before 1914, even if still on a restricted scale.

It is obvious from the previous discussion that the conditions for a fairly rapid (even if still very unbalanced) economic expansion existed for the tropical colonies, on the basis of export staples, whether agricultural or mineral, in the period when the overseas demand for such staples was still growing rapidly, as it was up until the late 1920s; and when the tropical colonies themselves could derive the maximum benefit from the relatively minimal input of infrastructure. The difficulties would arise when the easy growth path, based on export staples, became restricted, and the colonial economies would need to beat out new paths for themselves based on greater reliance on their own internal economic growth. This could in principle come from an extension and enlargement of the market which would have encouraged structural changes in their economies, leading ultimately to the partial replacement of the export staple trades by indigenous industrial and service sectors.[16]

CONSTRAINTS ON DEVELOPMENT

There are a number of major difficulties in the way of such a transformation—some economic and some political, which have already been alluded to. There were powerful vested interests, like the great trading companies, who profited from exporting the staples and also from *importing* British manufactured goods. Clearly for them the development of an indigenous manufacturing sector could have competed for domestic labour, and have possibly reduced the supply of staple exports while at the same time eating into the market for imported manufactures. To some extent these companies were also helped by the colonial governments, who derived much of their revenue from taxes on imports, and who naturally did not wish to see this source of supply reduced. At that point the economic and political forces came together.[17]

However, there is more to the matter than that. In wider terms, British businessmen in general looked to the colonies for expanded markets for a wide range of goods and services and also as possible fields for future investment. It was not necessarily in their interests to see these markets monopolised by a handful of trading companies, especially when the pattern of trade appeared to be approaching stagnation. For in the 1930s, as the colonial staples were over-produced, their prices fell dramatically and the terms of trade moved sharply against the tropical colonies. Inevitably as their incomes fell, they cut down on their imports from Britain, and their value, both as markets and fields for investment were painfully reduced. Conversely if they had had more diversified and resilient economies, the damage which was done both to the British and their own economies might have been reduced. Nor is colonial control necessarily inimical to all industrial development, even industrial development behind a protective tariff, as the case of India shows. Despite widespread opposition from Lancashire cotton interests, the imperial government of India introduced such protection in the 1930s in the greater interest of India's overall economic development.

These broader issues of weighing the relative economic merits of policies designed to increase overall economic development in the colonies, in the hope of securing a *linked* expansion in Britain itself, as against policies of favouring the more limited interests of companies already engaged in colonial trade and production, bring us back to the heart of the problem. In the evolution of central colonial economic policy, a range of general themes are relevant, which it is convenient to introduce briefly now, as they constantly recur throughout the later history of the colonial development effort, like the basic themes in a symphony.

We have alluded briefly to the factors which were generally favourable to the economic development of the tropical colonies, it is now necessary to consider some of the persistent negative factors which repeatedly occurred and hampered development. Part of the failure to realise hopes and aims arose from an underestimation of the size and intractability of the obstacles to development. These were of course of many types but the more important may be grouped under five main headings. First, there were widespread illusions about the richness of the colonies' resources. Initially these illusions were not unnatural, but inevitably they caused underestimation of the likely costs of development, and the raising of unrealistic expectations. Second, there were major problems of capital supply: private capitalists were much more reluctant to invest in unfamiliar and undeveloped areas than had been hoped; and where private capital would not lead, the British Treasury was equally reluctant to pioneer with public capital. There was a further problem relating to the use to which capital was put. In the 'Chamberlain model' much emphasis was placed on railway building, which was assumed to be economically sound and beneficial, although this never seems to have been investigated and properly tested in colonial conditions. In fact railways were often extremely expensive solutions to transport bottlenecks, and, because they were mostly financed with foreign capital, they placed a burden on colonial economies to earn enough foreign exchange to service and repay the necessary loans. This in turn led to an emphasis on maximising cash-crops and mineral exports, which was not always in the best interests of the colonies' long-term development. It was another problem arising from the inexperience and pre-conceived ideas of colonial administrators. Third, there were considerable political divisions and uncertainties in Britain. There were convinced imperialists, of varying degrees of enthusiasm, in all the major political parties, but in no party could they always be sure of consistent support. Even in the Conservative Party, where they were more numerous and influential, there remained some old-fashioned free-traders and believers in retrenchment, who doubted whether colonies would ever be worth the expenses of initial development and continuing defense. Such people were more common in the Liberal Party, where they were reinforced by radicals who objected on principle to what they regarded as colonial exploitation. This attitude was also strong in the Labour Party, but was offset to some extent by feelings of paternalism, and of an obligation to extend a helping hand to people who could not realistically be expected to do very much for themselves. This melange of opinions did not assist in the formulation of a consistent policy.

Fourth, there were different views and perspectives about what type of colonial development was needed. As previously mentioned, British companies involved in colonial trade, or with mining or plantation concessions, had their own specific interests to promote, and these were not always consistent with the optimum development strategy, whether viewed from London or the colonies themselves. In the latter the views of the indigenous people were not usually accorded very high priority, but were frequently reflected, though no doubt in distorted form, by paternalistic colonial administrators, like Sir Hugh Clifford in Malaya and West Africa, and Sir Donald Cameron in Nigeria and Tanganyika, who believed deeply in the concept of 'trusteeship' under which colonial rule would protect what they conceived to be the basic interests of the local people—which often in practice meant preserving the 'traditional society' in the state in which it happened to be when they encountered it.[18] This was often reflected in a naive or confused attitude to the agricultural and trading systems in being at the commencement of colonial rule. There were two aspects to this. There was a danger that where local agricultural systems were based on shifting cultivation, British officials would regard this as wasteful and inefficient and would seek to impose permanent cultivation, based perhaps on some ideas derived from the English 'agricultural revolution', without realising the importance of shifting cultivation in maintaining soil fertility and preventing erosion. An example of this was the statement by the director of forests in Southern Nigeria that 'all the available forests of Southern Nigeria were in process of rapid extinction, owing primarily to the thriftless system of "shifting cultivation" by which the agricultural population were constantly burning the forest in order to obtain virgin soil'.[19] Yet in a well-regulated shifting system the burnt forest is allowed to regenerate in a 10–14 year cycle.[20] Conversely there was the possibility that officials would idealise the traditional systems and would regard them as a tropical version of 'Merrie England' as Sir Hugh Clifford seems to have done in Malaya before 1914. Lastly, and perhaps at a lower level of causation, there was too often a lack of imagination regarding development by the men on the spot, even when London was calling for initiatives after the passing of the Colonial Development Act in 1929. This arose partly because senior colonial rulers were often short-term residents (governors seldom stayed in one colony for more than four years) and hence found it difficult to formulate, let alone execute, long-term plans or projects. Their eyes were fixed on promotion in an imperial system which was far larger than the colony they were in at any particular time. Hence, pleasing the Colonial Office (which often meant in practice, pleasing the Treasury) was far more important than formulating expensive development plans.

It is not necessary to elaborate any further here on the various impediments to development since they form the substance of much that follows; but since the illusion of vast riches, just waiting to unfold at the touch of the British colonial administrator's wand, proved so alluring and so long-lasting, it is appropriate to end with two contemporary examples, taken from the early days of colonial enthusiasm, before any bitter experiences had a chance to tarnish the glitter. Shortly after the 'scramble' for Africa was over the prospects for development there, and even beyond in Siam and China, seemed dazzling to the *Chamber of Commerce Journal,* which could declare in June 1894 that

> Africa…presented infinite possibilities. Its peaceful partition by Lord Salisbury and its free opening to our trade was the commercial event of our century…. If only we would dare to govern the development of such countries meant the renewal of trade on the grandest scale;

> and the same might be said of our relations with Siam and…the southern provinces of China.[21]

A few years later, when Britain was daring to govern, the young Winston Churchill, under-secretary of state at the Colonial Office, toured East Africa, and, after a brief sojourn in Uganda in 1907 declared that

> Uganda is the pearl…that Uganda will become one of the greatest centres of tropical produce in the world seems to me to be indubitable.[22]

Uganda did indeed become an important source of cotton in the 1920s and 1930s, though hardly of tropical produce in general; but it also exhibited that characteristic dependence on one crop which distorted the development of so many tropical colonies, and which still remains one of the most persistent problems of Third World countries.

2

The tropical colonies in the mid-Victorian age (1850–70)

Opportunities and problems

THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF THE TROPICAL COLONIES

The 1850s make a good starting point for an analysis of the development of the tropical empire, because they were the critical decade during which vital decisions had to be taken as to whether it was worth retaining tropical colonies at all, since the process of granting responsible government to the settlement colonies was in full swing. The economic difficulties experienced by the West Indies after the final ending of slavery in 1838, the high costs (both in money and lives) of maintaining the navy's anti-slave trade patrols off the West African coast, and the generally disease-laden and unpromising aspect of tropical areas, made many people in Britain feel that the retention of tropical colonies (let alone their expansion) was a foolish and costly enterprise. Disraeli's famous comment in 1852 about the colonies being a 'millstone around our necks' captured this mood, but in the event it proved to be only a passing phase.[1] Despite much agonising Britain did not give up its tropical colonies. On the contrary it began a process—slow and hesitating at first—of gradually expanding them, so that by 1885, (even before the scramble for Africa) the size of the tropical empire was very considerably greater than it had been in 1850.[2] The reasons for this were varied and complex and will be considered in more detail for each region in due course.

What then was the inheritance of tropical colonies whose uncertain future the Colonial Office controlled in 1850? In Table 2.1 the tropical colonies are listed with their populations in the early 1850s, and in 1881. In that period of about 30 years their population virtually doubled from around 3.1 million to 6.1 million. The Asian colonies were the most populous at both dates: Ceylon leading the way with a population of a little over 1.7 million in the early 1850s, followed by the Straits Settlements in the Malayan peninsula with just over 200,000 inhabitants and Mauritius with just under that figure. The Asian colonies increased their population from nearly 2.2 million in 1850 to 3.85 million in 1881, but their relative share

Table 2.1 British tropical colonies c. 1850 with population
(in rank of population, by region)

		Population *c.* 1850	% of total	New additions	Population *c.* 1881	% of Total
	Caribbean					
1	Jamaica	377,433			580,804	
2	Barbados	135,939			171,860	
3	Brit. Guiana	127,695			257,940	
4	Trinidad	68,600			153,281	
5	Antigua	37,136			34,963	
6	Grenada	32,671			43,757	
7	St. Vincent	30,128			40,548	
8	St Lucia	24,123			40,154	
9	Dominica	22,220			28,211	
10	St Kitts	20,741			29,137	
11	Tobago	14,378			18,051	
12	Nevis	9,571			11,864	
13	Montserrat	7,053			10,296	
14	Virgin Is.	6,689			5,287	
15	Brit. Honduras	4,500			27,452	
16	Turks & Caicos Is.	*included in Jamaica*			4,778	
	TOTAL	918,877	29.5%		1,458,383	23.9%
	Asia			Fiji (1874)	130,270	
1	Ceylon	1,713,738			2,763,984	
2	Straits Settle.	202,540/(1857)			423,384	
3	Mauritius	192,503			370.766	
4	Hong Kong	36,788			160,402	
5	Labuan	1,150			5,833	
	TOTAL	2,146,719	68.9%		3,854,639	63.0
	Africa			Lagos (1861)	75,270	
1	Sierra Leone	44,472			60,546	
2	Gambia	5,502			15,150	
3	Gold Coast	1,200		Protectorate (1874)		
	TOTAL	51,174	1.6%		800,966	13.1
	GRAND TOTAL	3,116,770			6,113,988	100

amongst the tropical colonies fell slightly from 68.9 per cent to 63 per cent, although they still remained by far the most important group numerically.

The biggest relative gainers were the West African colonies. With only 51,174 inhabitants in the early 1850s, they had only 1.6 per cent of the population, and were an insignificant group, widely believed to be on the point of abandonment by the British government.

Indeed, with the ending of the American Civil War in 1865, and the belief that this would lead to the final cessation of the slave trade (it did not because slavery continued in Brazil and Cuba almost until 1900)[3] the House of Commons set up a select committee to provide the evidence that the retention of the West African colonies was no longer necessary. To many people's surprise the committee was unable to make the unequivocal recommendation that some of its members had hoped for. As always the facts were found to be much more complicated than most people had thought.

The committee reported on 26 June 1865, as follows:

> That it is the opinion of this Committee:
>
> 1 That it is not possible to withdraw the British Government, wholly or immediately, from any settlements or engagements on the West African Coast.
>
> 2 That the settlement on the Gambia may be reduced by McCarthy's Island, which is 150 miles up the river, being no longer occupied; and that the settlement should be confined as much as possible to the mouth of the river.
>
> 3 That all further extension of territory or assumption of Government, or new treaties offering any protection to native tribes, would be inexpedient; and that the object of our policy should be to encourage in the natives the exercise of those qualities which may render it possible for us more and more to transfer to them the administration of all the Governments, with a view to an ultimate withdrawal from all, except, probably Sierra Leone.
>
> 4 That this policy of non-extension admits of no exception, as regards new settlements, but cannot amount to an absolute prohibition of measures which, in peculiar cases, may be necessary for the more efficient and economical administration of the settlements we already possess.[4]

Essentially the committee came up against three intractable, and linked, problems. These were (1) the need to sustain the settlement of Christian Africans around Freetown in Sierra Leone, who had been liberated from the slave ships at sea, and to keep Sierra Leone as long as the slave trade continued; (2) to suppress the slave trade; and (3) to stimulate 'legitimate' trade (basically a trade in palm oil at this time) in order both to finance the administration of the British forts and settlements and to provide an alternative trade to replace the slave trade.

These points were well illustrated in the evidence which Richard Burton, the famous explorer, gave to the committee. First he was reassuring about the economic prospects for the palm oil trade especially from the coast round Lagos, which had been annexed by Britain in 1861.

> *Question:* What is the present amount of the palm oil trade? *Answer:* I believe it is between 2,000 and 3,000 tons.
>
> *Question:* And do you think it could be raised up to 100,000 tons? *Answer:* I think so.[5]

But on the intractable problems of suppressing the slave trade (an essential pre-requisite for increasing legitimate trade) he was far less reassuring.

> *Question:* Proceeding to the Gold Coast territory, from the Volta to the Assinee, do you consider, with our present objects in view namely, the suppression of the slave trade, as well as the extension of commerce, that we could do that work with fewer ports than the four or five which we now maintain? *Answer:* If the export of slaves continues in demand, and we remove those forts, the Ashantees will necessarily come down to the coast and they will be in a position to export any number of slaves; on the other hand, supposing the country to be relieved of that export of slaves, we might do without them.
>
> *Question:* So long as the demand for slaves continues, you think that we cannot do without our present forts? *Answer:* Certainly not without Cape Coast, Accra and Annamaboe, and we ought to re-establish the settlement of Addah on the Volta to have two ports at the mouth of the Volta. I was there in 1862, and I found 400 slaves in the barracoon.[6]

Thus, even though Burton was personally in favour of withdrawal, he seemed to recognise that it was not a practical option.[7] Instead the Lagos colony and the Gold Coast protectorate were added to them, so that by 1881 they had over 800,000 inhabitants and comprised 13.1 per cent of the population. They were soon to be joined by Nigeria.[8]

THE WEST INDIES

The most numerous, and the oldest, of the colonies were the West Indian Islands, which had slightly over 900,000 inhabitants in 1850 and nearly 1.5 million in 1881 falling from 29.5 per cent to 23.9 per cent of the total. However, as can be seen from Table 2.1 most of the islands had insignificant populations, and only four of them had more than 100,000 inhabitants by 1881. Of these Jamaica, with over half a million, was much the most populous, followed by British Guiana, Barbados and Trinidad. The West Indian colonies were a source of sore perplexity to the Colonial Office. Their great age as English colonies, going back to the seventeenth century, their vociferous English planter-settlers organised in Parliament in the West India Committee, and their past importance as naval bases, made their abandonment extremely difficult: but the steady decline of their sugar exports after the equalisation of Britain's sugar import duties in 1854, wreaked havoc with their economies. The loss of the protection they had previously enjoyed made it very difficult for them to compete with sugar from Cuba and Brazil, which was still being produced by slave labour until the 1880s.[9]

As the largest and most populous of the island colonies (excluding mainland British Guiana) Jamaica appeared to have more potential in the 1850s than any other except perhaps Trinidad: but with an area of 4,411 square miles Jamaica was well over twice as large as Trinidad (see Table 2.1). An island of great beauty, and a British colony since 1655, Jamaica had long been famous for its sugar production; and yet had a rugged and mountainous terrain which made communication and internal transport difficult, as noted by the novelist Anthony Trollope who visited the West Indies in 1859, to help reorganise their decrepit postal system. Of Jamaica, he wrote that despite its fame for sugar cane

> one may travel for days in the island and see only a cane piece here and there. By far the greater portion of the island is covered with wild wood and jungle—what is there called bush. Through this, on an occasional favourable spot, and very frequently on the roadsides, one sees the gardens or provision-grounds of the negroes. These are spots of land cultivated by them, for which they neither pay rent, or on which, as is quite as common, they have squatted without payment of any rent.
>
> These provision-grounds are very picturesque, They…contain cocoa-trees, breadfruit trees, oranges, mangoes, limes, plantains, jock fruit, sour-sop, avocado pears, and a score of others.

In addition there were yams, a West African root which formed the staple food, and occasionally patches of coffee, arrowroot and sugar cane.[10]

The existence of these small-holdings lay at the root of what the European planters (and many in the Colonial Office) perceived to be Jamaica's fundamental economic problem; for they had rendered the former slaves to a considerable extent self-sufficient in food, and hence partly independent of wage-labour, especially at the very low rates being offered by the planters. Hence the sugar planters were afflicted not only with low prices and foreign competition, but with a labour force which was only prepared to work irregularly, and which could not be compelled to turn out at critical periods like planting-time and harvest; though the planters no doubt much

Table 2.2 Jamaica sugar exports (in tons), 1829/33–1853/55

Yearly average	Tons
1829–33	69,206[a]
1835–38	52,004[a]
1842–45	33,895[a]
1853–55	22,950[b]

[a] To UK only.
[b] To all destinations.

exaggerated this reluctance. As a combined result of all these factors sugar exports in the mid-1850s were less than one-third of what they had been in the final days of slavery in the early 1830s, as can be seen from Table 2.2.

Clearly Jamaica's future lay in a diversification away from sugar production to other types of activity. Trollope believed that meat production might be the answer:

> I saw various grazing farms—pens they are here called…and I could not but fancy that grazing in Jamaica should be the natural and most beneficial pursuit of the proprietor…I never saw grass to equal the guinea grass in some of the parishes; and at Knockalva I looked at Hereford cattle which I have rarely, if ever, seen beaten at any agricultural show in England. At present the island does not altogether supply itself with meat; but it might do so, and supply, moreover, nearly the whole of the West Indies. Proprietors of land say that the sea transit is too costly. Of course it is at present; the trade not yet existing; for indeed, at present there is no means of such transit. But screw steamers now appear quickly enough wherever freight offers itself; and if the cattle were there, they would soon find their way down to the Windward Islands.[11]

Here Trollope put his finger on one of the biggest problems facing West Indian colonies; the absence of an adequate transportation system. Local trade was insufficient to make such a system profitable, but without such a system diversification out of sugar was highly unlikely, especially in view of the strong prejudices which most planters still clung to. Trollope states that it would be highly unwise to advise the planters to give up sugar 'if you give such advice in a voice loud enough to be heard, the island will soon be too hot to hold you. Sugar is loved there, whether wisely loved or not. If not wisely, then too well'.[12]

Trollope also complained about the bad state of the roads, and the miserably unsanitary condition of the towns, especially Kingston, the largest town, but not the capital city (which was at nearby Spanish Town). His pessimism was shared by Governor Sir Charles Grey, who in his annual report to the colonial secretary for 1852, wrote that

> The revenue does not fully meet the authorised public expenditure, although within the period of my government that expenditure…had been reduced by nearly one third of the whole.[13]

He had reduced it from £304,658 in 1847 to £218,648 in 1850, but owing to an outbreak of cholera, and other necessary expenses, the government's debt had increased substantially, and then stood at 'between £700,000 and £800,000'. With a falling revenue he foresaw difficulties in meeting future interest payments.[13] He was forced to say 'with a feeling of great regret that the colony still remains in a very languishing and depressed condition'.[14]

The island of Trinidad, although smaller and less developed than Jamaica, seemed to offer brighter prospects. Situated about 10° north of the Equator and only a few miles offshore from Venezuela, it was much flatter than Jamaica, although it had some mountains, and hence offered more scope for agriculture and improved communications. However it is quite small, being about 50 miles from north to south, and 37 miles from east to west and comprising 1,863 square miles in all. In the 1850s it was still relatively underpopulated with slightly fewer than 70,000 inhabitants. This created a labour shortage on the sugar plantations, which was being alleviated by the importation of indentured labourers from India, thus building up potential trouble for the future.

Sugar still retained its obsessive predominance in the economy. In 1850 16,837 tons were exported compared with only 1,594 tons of cocoa, the next most important export. Trivial quantities of molasses, coffee, cotton and rum were also exported, but the staples of the future, asphalt from the famous pitch lake, and petroleum were unutilised or undiscovered.[15]

Trollope was much taken with the beauty of the island's scenery, noting in 1859 that it was an island

> great portions of which are but very imperfectly known; of which but comparatively a very small part has been cultivated. During the last eight or ten years, ten or twelve thousand immigrants, chiefly Coolies from Madras and Calcutta, have been brought into Trinidad, forming now above an eighth part of its entire population; and the consequence has been that in two years, from 1855, namely to 1857, its imports were increased by one-third, and its exports by two-thirds.[16]

Nevertheless, much of the island was still underdeveloped and Trollope spent most of his time in and around the capital, Port of Spain. He added that

> a tour through the whole of Trinidad would richly repay the trouble, though indeed, it would be troublesome. The tourist must take his

> own provisions, unless, indeed, he provided himself by means of his gun, and must also take his bed. The mosquitoes, too, are very vexatious.[17]

In spite of a minuscule annual revenue of £88,660, the governor, Lord Harris, was able to report in his despatch of 10 February 1851, that

> I have been enabled to effect a very decided improvement in the condition of the roads, which…will in a short time become general to the whole island.[18]

He had also been repairing decayed bridges and had taken precautions lest the 'fearful scourge' of cholera should spread to the island from Jamaica:

> A sanitary inspector has been appointed, who is in constant communication with the police, in order to enforce the laws bearing on the subject. The wardens have been instructed to be prepared to establish hospitals and dispensaries in their wards at a moments notice, and a good supply of medicine has been secured.[19]

Perhaps not surprisingly he had been able to do little about education and reported that

> I am sorry that I am not able to give a very satisfactory account of the general progress of education, the scarcity of efficient teachers being the principal impediment, and which must continue until a good normal school be established.

He regretted that he could not make proper statistical returns, and hoped that when a census had been taken, and a postal service was 'punctually at work', he would be able to remedy the defect. This was written eight years before Trollope's visit on behalf of the Post Office. Despite the paucity of his resources, Lord Harris ended by noting the rising sugar exports, and a belief 'that the material prospects of the island are good'.[20]

The largest underdeveloped colony in the Caribbean was British Guiana, occupying a chunk of the mainland of South America, just to the east of Venezuela. Situated just to the north of the Equator and comprising some 83,000 square miles, British Guiana was nearly as large as the United Kingdom (which is approx. 94,000 square miles), but was largely unexplored and very sparsely populated, with a recorded population of slightly under 128,000 people in 1851. These would have been virtually all resident on the coastal strip, and probably did not include the small, scattered Amerindian population in the remote interior. Like the Caribbean Islands British Guiana was a sugar colony, and