Definition: **British Empire** from *Collins English Dictionary*

1 (formerly) the United Kingdom and the territories under its control, which reached its greatest extent at the end of World War I when it embraced over a quarter of the world's population and more than a quarter of the world's land surface

Summary Article: **British Empire**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Empire covering, at its height in the 1920s, about a sixth of the landmass of the Earth, all of its lands recognizing the United Kingdom (UK) as their leader. It consisted of the Empire of India, four self-governing countries known as dominions, and dozens of colonies and territories. The Empire was a source of great pride to the British, who believed that it was an institution for civilizing the world, and for many years Empire Day (24 May) saw celebration throughout the UK. After World War II it began to dissolve as colony after colony became independent, and in 2001 the UK had only 13 small dependent territories. With 53 other independent countries, it forms the British Commonwealth.

Although Britain's monarch is accepted as head of the Commonwealth, most of its member states are republics.

The present Commonwealth is a voluntary association of independent states. Only one of its members, Mozambique, which joined in 1995, was never a British colony (it was Portuguese). The Commonwealth's links are mainly cultural and economic, depending upon the fact that the English language is the lingua franca of all educated people in the territories that formed the British Empire, on the continuing ties of trade, and on the financial and technical aid provided by the economically developed members to the developing members.

**Early empire** The story of the British Empire began in 1497 when the Italian seafarer John Cabot sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in the service of King Henry VII of England and reached Newfoundland. In 1583 the explorer Sir Humphrey Gilbert took possession of Newfoundland for Elizabeth I. By this time the Portuguese and Spanish had divided between them a considerable part of the Earth's land surface. England was already a formidable power at sea, but its seafarers were mainly freebooters (lawless adventurers) engaged in trade, piracy, and slavery. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 reinforced English sea power, which continued to be mostly privately organized. Unlike the Spanish and Portuguese, the English in the 16th century were neither missionaries nor colonists. England was a poor country, lacking the wealth of Portugal and Spain; when the English put to sea it was to seek immediate profits.

**17th century** This pattern began to change in the 17th century. Between 1623 and 1632 English settlers occupied St Kitts, Barbados, St Croix (later lost), Nevis, Antigua, and Montserrat. In 1655, Oliver Cromwell's forces took Jamaica from the Spanish, who officially acknowledged British ownership in 1760. British Honduras (now Belize) was governed as part of Jamaica until 1884, and the tiny South
Atlantic island of St Helena was annexed in 1673. The attraction of the West Indies for the English lay in the sugar and rum produced there. Virginia, the first permanent English colony in mainland America, was established in 1607 by the Virginia Company, which also took over Bermuda in about 1612. Shortly after this, in 1620, the Pilgrim Fathers landed from the ship Mayflower to found the colony of Massachusetts. By 1733, the English had established 13 colonies along the Atlantic seaboard between French Canada and Spanish Florida. The colonists began to plant cotton in the 17th century, and this plantation crop was being grown on a very large scale by the late 18th century.

18th century In 1707 England had united with Scotland to form, as Great Britain, the largest free-trade area then existing, and by the late 18th century Britain had become the leading industrial nation. Its main pattern of trade was based on the triangular trade route: British ships took manufactured goods and spirits to West Africa to exchange for slaves, whom they transported to the West Indies and the southernmost of the 13 colonies. The ships then returned to Britain with cargoes of cotton, rum, sugar, and tobacco, produced mainly by the labour of the black slaves. Britain's prosperity was bound up with the slave trade until this became illegal in 1807. By that time the importance of the slave trade had diminished and other forms of commerce had become more profitable. With other western European nations, the British had already established a string of forts in West Africa to safeguard the trade in slaves, gold, and ivory.

In 1756–63 the Seven Years' War against France – which included the capture of Québec (1759) by James Wolfe, the incident of the Black Hole of Calcutta (1756), and Robert Clive's victory at the Battle of Plassey (1757), India – resulted in Britain acquiring lands in Canada and India, more islands in the West Indies, and Gibraltar. Although the 13 colonies on the North Atlantic seaboard won independence as the United States of America in the American Revolution (1776–83), Britain acquired the Bahamas in 1783, and the defeat of France in the Napoleonic Wars – including the victory at the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) by Admiral Horatio Nelson – enabled Britain to add Malta, St Lucia, Grenada, Dominica, St Vincent, Trinidad, Tobago, part of Guiana (now Guyana), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the Seychelles, and Cape Colony (now part of South Africa) to its empire.

Spread of science In the 17th and 18th centuries the British ruling class developed a great interest in science, which had repercussions on the growth of the British Empire. Between 1768 and 1779 scientific naval expeditions commanded by Captain James Cook explored islands and coasts of the Pacific Ocean, from the entrance to the Arctic Ocean at the Bering Strait to the then unknown coasts of New Zealand and Australia.

Successive British governments showed no more interest in annexing these southern lands than they had in places elsewhere. In most cases they left the building of the empire to private individuals such as William Penn (who founded Pennsylvania) or to chartered companies, the most famous of which was the East India Company (1660–1858). An important exception was in the West Indies, where government intervention was frequent because many members of Parliament had commercial interests there.

Convict settlements One reason for the British government's interest in the 13 American colonies was as a dumping ground for convicts, debtors, and political prisoners, many of whom were sentenced to transportation rather than to gaol or the gallows (at that time the law provided the death sentence for stealing a sheep). American independence posed the problem for Britain of where to send its surplus prison population, so in 1788 a new convict settlement was established in Australia at Botany Bay in New South Wales, near where Sydney is now located. This territory had been recently
discovered by the voyages of James Cook.

19th century Britain annexed New Zealand in 1840, Tristan da Cunha in 1816, the Falkland Islands in 1833, and Papua in 1884. In 1878 Turkey handed over Cyprus to a British administration.

India At the heart of the British Empire was India, which was controlled not by the government but by the East India Company, whose power extended from Aden (annexed in 1839) in Arabia to Penang (leased in 1786) in Malaya. Both places were vital ports of call for company vessels travelling between Britain, India, and China. Politically, the East India Company was the most powerful private company in history. It controlled India partly by direct rule and partly by a system of alliances with Indian princes, whose powers and security were backed by the company's powerful army. Finally, in 1857, a mutiny by its Indian troops terminated the company's affairs, and in 1858 the British government took over its functions. In 1877, Benjamin Disraeli, then prime minister, made Queen Victoria Empress of India. Her new empire included present-day India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and most of Myanmar (Burma). In 1887 the nearby Maldives became a British protectorate.

Imperialism By this time British policy was becoming imperialistic. In the last quarter of the 19th century Britain tended to annex countries not just for commercial gain but for reasons of national prestige. The commercial operations of the East India Company extended into the East Indies, a vast area that had come under Dutch control. When the Netherlands were occupied by the French under Napoleon (1793–1815), the East India Company occupied parts of the Dutch East Indies, including Malacca (now called Melaka) in 1795. Malacca was briefly restored to the Dutch in 1818, but the Anglo–Dutch Treaty of 1824 recognized the Malay Peninsula as being within the British sphere of influence, and in 1825 the Dutch exchanged Malacca for Benkoelen in Sumatra. When the British government took over from the East India Company it also acquired the Straits Settlements. These comprised Penang (ceded to the Company by the sultan of Kedah in 1786), Malacca, and Singapore, founded by Stamford Raffles in 1819. Increasingly the British became involved in the affairs of the Malay Sultanates, several of which sought British protection from the domination of Siam (now Thailand). By 1914 all of Malaya was under British control. In Borneo, Sarawak had become the personal possession of James Brooke, a freebooting, British ex-soldier of the East India Company. Present-day Sabah became a British protectorate in 1888, following concessions made to the British North Borneo Company by the sultan of Salu in 1777–78. Also in 1888, the once powerful adjoining sultanate of Brunei, which had formerly possessed Sarawak and Sabah, itself came under British protection.

This vast empire had been assembled without any coordinated plan, and it was held together and administered by whatever means seemed most expedient for a particular place. Pirates, traders, soldiers, explorers, financial speculators, missionaries, convicts, and refugees all played a part in creating the British Empire, but increasingly British governments were drawn in to maintain it. To protect India's northwest frontier, the British army fought two wars with Afghanistan (1839–41 and 1878–80) and in 1904 invaded Tibet.

Hong Kong The acquisition of Hong Kong was typical of the way in which western countries seized colonies between about 1840 and 1890. In 1839 China stopped the importation by the East India Company of opium, which China complained was having a debilitating effect upon its people. When British and American ships defied the ban, Chinese officials publicly destroyed 20,000 cases of the drug. Faced with the collapse of its Far Eastern operations (for without the opium trade it was not financially viable), the East India Company persuaded the British government, then led by Lord
Palmerston, to declare war on China. As a result of the Opium War, Britain gained Hong Kong Island. Kowloon was added to the colony after a second Opium War (1856–58) and more mainland territory was taken in 1898.

Colonizing Africa Before the 1880s the British showed little interest in Africa apart from Cape Colony, although the Scottish explorer Mungo Park explored the Niger River 1795–97. However, during the 19th century, there developed a ‘scramble for Africa’. This was partly to secure the mineral wealth of the continent, partly to secure markets against foreign competition, partly to spread Christianity and British culture, and partly to provide an outlet for British adventurers. The first large group of British settlers landed in the Cape in 1820. They were bitterly resented by the Boers, the descendants of Dutch Protestants who had settled in the Cape nearly 200 years earlier. When slavery was ended throughout the British Empire in 1833, the Boers were forced to free their African slaves. Although the British government gave them generous financial compensation, the Boers regarded this further interference by the British as too much to accept. In 1835 they began the ‘Great Trek’ northward to found the Orange Free State and the South African Republic. By 1856 the British had recognized the independence of these states but had themselves founded a new colony in Natal. After heavy fighting, beginning in 1879, the British conquered the African military state of Zululand and added it to Natal in 1897.

The discovery of diamonds and gold in southern Africa led to disputes between the Boers and the British. Britain annexed the South African Republic, but the Boers struck back. They won the first of the South African Wars, or Boer Wars, (1880–81), and regained the lost territory, which the Boers renamed the Transvaal Republic.

Britain had maintained a few forts in West Africa, where gold and ivory kept their importance after the slave trade ended. An exception was Sierra Leone, where Granville Sharp, an Englishman opposed to slavery, established a settlement of freed American slaves in 1787. This coastal strip of Sierra Leone was made a British colony in 1808. In 1821 the British established a coastal colony around the tiny town of Bathurst on the River Gambia. Only later were colonies established on the coasts of present-day Ghana and Nigeria. Basutoland (now Lesotho) became a British protectorate in 1868, at the request of Moshoeshoe I (1790–1870), paramount chief of the Sothi nation.

From the 1880s onward Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain vied with each other to establish colonies in Africa. British protectorates were established to cover roughly the area of present-day Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria. Because of the climate, which gave West Africa its reputation as ‘the white man’s grave’, these colonies attracted very few British settlers.

In East Africa the situation was different, for on high ground the land proved suitable for settlement by white colonists. Private companies under charter from the British government established control over Kenya in 1888 and Uganda in 1890. Uganda became a British protectorate in 1894, and Kenya became the East African Protectorate in 1895. In 1890 Germany, which had already relinquished its interests in Uganda, ceded Zanzibar (now part of Tanzania) to Britain in exchange for Heligoland, an island off the German coast. By 1900 all Kenya and Uganda was under the control of the British government. Northern Somalia had come under direct control of the British in 1884. By the time the European scramble for Africa ended, Britain held the second-largest share of the continent.

British missionaries of all denominations spread the Christian religion throughout the empire. They made proportionately little impression in places where the religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam...
dominated, but even in those areas their converts numbered several millions. Their success was greater in the West Indies and in Africa south of the Sahara.

David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary, explored much of the area that is now Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Like several other intrepid explorers, who included Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, and Samuel Baker, Livingstone explored the River Nile. His journeys also took him to the Zambezi River and to lakes Tanganyika and Nyasa. Following Livingstone’s journeys, the Free Church of Scotland set up a mission in Nyasaland (now Malawi) in 1875, and the country became a British protectorate in 1891. Bechuanaland (now Botswana) became a British protectorate in 1885.

In the late 1880s the British South Africa Company, which was largely controlled by Cecil Rhodes, negotiated land mineral rights from African chiefs in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. By 1889 the company had conquered these two territories and united them as Rhodesia, named after Rhodes. The company intervened further northwards, stamping out the slave trade and bringing that area under their control too. They named it Northern Rhodesia (which later became Zambia).

In 1890 Rhodes became prime minister of Cape Colony, at a time when tension was again mounting between the Boers and the British. The Boers resisted encroachments in their territories by British speculators interested in the diamonds and gold known to exist there. After three years of the second of the South African Wars, or Boer Wars (1899–1902), the two Boer republics, plus Swaziland, were annexed by Britain.

**Dominions and independence** Britain took care not to lose any more colonies through wars of independence. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were a special case; their great distance from Britain made it desirable that they should have a great measure of control over their own affairs. The concept of self-government was first formulated in the ‘Report on the Affairs of British North America’ in 1839 by Lord John Durham, Canada’s governor-general. This report recommended that ‘responsible government’ (the acceptance by governors of the advice of local ministers) should be granted to Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Québec), which should be merged into one. The merge took place immediately, but responsible government did not come into being until 1847 under the governorship of Lord Elgin, the son-in-law of Lord Durham.

This pattern was subsequently applied to the other Canadian provinces and to the Australian colonies. The Australian colonies had attained responsible government by 1859, except for Western Australia, which attained it in 1890. New Zealand obtained responsible government in all but native affairs in 1856, and this exception disappeared by 1870. Cape Colony achieved responsible government in 1872, followed by Natal in 1893.

The British devised a further intermediate stage between colonial status and independence, which came to be called dominion status. Canada became a dominion in 1867, Australia in 1901, New Zealand in 1907, and the Union of South Africa (Cape Colony, Natal, Orange Free State, and Transvaal) by 1910. These constitutional changes were effected with assent from the dominion states. Eire (southern Ireland), which had been part of the UK, also became a dominion as the Irish Free State in 1922, but it did not acknowledge this status and declared itself independent in 1938. Eire’s breakaway was accomplished only with much violence and bitterness.

To improve communications with India, Disraeli purchased for Britain shares in the Suez Canal in 1875. This led to British involvement in Egypt, a country supposedly under Turkish suzerainty, but in fact
largely independent. In 1882 Egypt came under British occupation, and shortly after this British and Egyptian troops were jointly involved in Sudan, to the south. By 1899, a protectorate had been established, setting up a condominium (joint sovereignty) called Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The great dream of Rhodes had been that one day the British Empire in Africa would stretch from the Cape to Cairo. By 1899 this dream was almost a reality; only German East Africa (Tanganyika) stood in the way. The defeat of Germany and Turkey in World War I not only gave Britain a mandate over Tanganyika, but also over Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq, and part of Cameroon. German Southwest Africa (now Namibia) went to South Africa, German New Guinea to Australia, German Samoa to New Zealand, and the Pacific island of Nauru to Britain, Australia, and New Zealand jointly.

20th century Loyalty was strong throughout most of the British Empire in World War I, but by the 1920s the Empire had reached its zenith. As well as the places already mentioned, it included part of Antarctica and many small territories, mainly Pacific islands. Its continuance depended upon British superiority at sea, upon the ability of Britain to maintain its industrial and financial supremacy, and also upon the psychological acceptance of British (and Western) superiority. However, all three factors were waning. In the 1920s there had been stirrings in India, where Mahatma Gandhi led unarmed protests, called 'civil disobedience', to British rule. By 1939 the end of all empires was near, and World War II speeded their end. After the war ended the rest of the empire began to break up. India was the first to acquire independence, dividing as it did so into two countries, India and Pakistan. The rest of the colonies then became independent, most of them before 1980. With the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 Britain was left with only 13 small dependencies.

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