INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT OF AN EMPIRE

For more than a century after c.1840, the British Empire formed the core of a larger British 'world-system' managed from London. This book is a study of the rise, fortunes and fall of that system.

The British world-system was not a structure of global hegemony, holding in thrall the non-Western world. Except in particular places and at particular times, such hegemonic authority eluded all British leaders from Lord Palmerston to Churchill. But the British 'system' (a term that contemporaries sometimes made use of) was much more than a 'formal' territorial empire, and certainly global in span. It embraced an extraordinary range of constitutional, diplomatic, political, commercial and cultural relationships. It contained colonies of rule (including the huge 'sub-empire' of India), settlement colonies (mostly self-governing by the late nineteenth century), protectorates, condominia (like the Sudan), mandates (after 1920), naval and military fortresses (like Gibraltar and Malta), 'occupations' (like Egypt and Cyprus), treaty-ports and 'concessions' (Shanghai was the most famous), 'informal' colonies of commercial pre-eminence (like Argentina), 'spheres of interference' (a useful term coined by Sellars and Yeatman) like Iran, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, and (not least) a rebellious province at home. There was no agreed term for this far-flung conglomerate. This may have been why contemporaries sometimes found it convenient to fall back on that protean phrase 'the *Pax Britannica*' once it came into use after 1880,[1] as if the 'British Peace' formed a geographical zone.

But, if they found it hard to label this web of British connections with any precision, contemporaries grasped nonetheless that it

formed the real source of British world power. In retrospect, we can see that, by the 1840s at latest, the British system was becoming global in three different senses. First, it exerted its presence, commercial or military, in every world region from treaty-port China and the maritime East Indies, through Burma, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, Zanzibar and West Africa, to the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the River Plate republics, and as far as the Pacific coast of North America, the future 'British' Columbia. Secondly, however clumsy its methods, the point of the system was to promote the integration of these widely separated places: commercially, strategically, politically and – by diffusing British beliefs and ideas – culturally as well. Shared political values, recognisably similar institutions and laws, mutual economic dependence, and common protection against external attack by European rivals or predatory locals, were meant to achieve this for regions and states whether outside or inside the British domain in the constitutional sense. Thirdly, although this aspect was hard to see at the time, the success and survival of British connections depended on something far vaster than the tactics and stratagems of British agents and interests. Economic and political change in Asia, the Qing crisis in China, the geopolitical shape of post-Bonaparte Europe, the unexpected success of the settler republic on the American continent, patterns of consumption, religious renewals and the movements of peoples in migrations and diasporas: all these (and more) opened the way for British expansion, and widened the scope of British connections – but prescribed both their limits and their duration in time. If the British system was global, its fate was a function of the global economy and of shifts in world politics which it might hope to influence but could hardly control.

But was it really a 'system'? There are good grounds for thinking that the British empire of rule, let alone its self-governing or 'informal' outriders, had no logic at all. It looked like the booty of an obsessive collector whose passions had come with a rush and then gone with the wind, to be replaced in their turn by still more transient interests. The result was a pile of possessions whose purpose or meaning was long since forgotten, half-opened packets of quickly waning appeal, and new acquisitions made on the spur of the moment. It was certainly true that by the mid-nineteenth century the West Indian colonies, once the jewel in their crown, seemed to most British observers a troublesome burden, tainted by slavery, ill-governed and impoverished. The small enclaves of rule on the coast of West Africa had an even worse reputation.

London regretted the effort to rule the Southern African interior, and had handed it over to the Boer republics by the mid-1850s. It was also the case that British expansion had no master-plan. It had almost always been true that colonial schemes or their commercial equivalents were devised not by governments but by private enthusiasts in search of wealth, virtue or religious redemption. Sometimes they dragged Whitehall in their wake, to get its protection, secure a monopoly or obtain a licence to rule through a charter or patent. By 'insider-dealing' in the political world, they might conscript Whitehall's resources for their colony-building. Sometimes Whitehall insisted on an imperial claim on its soldiers' or sailors' advice, or to appease a popular outcry. But, once entrenched at their beachhead, the 'men on the spot' were hard to restrain, awkward to manage and impossible to abandon. The result could be seen from the map. The huge swathes of territory scattered all over the globe, whose defence, so it seemed to some late Victorians, was little short of a nightmare.

This is a useful corrective to paying too much attention to the mood of the 'policy-makers', to invoking too often the cool rationality (or constant viewpoint) of the 'official mind', or to being over-impressed by the so-called 'reluctance' of British imperialism. British expansion was driven not by official designs but by the chaotic pluralism of British interests at home and of their agents and allies abroad. The result (by the mid-nineteenth century) was an empire of beachheads and bridgeheads, half-conquered tracts, half-settled interiors, mission-stations and whaling-stations, barracks and cantonments, treaty-ports on the up (Shanghai was the best) and treaty-ports with no future. Its mid-Victorian critics were appalled by its moral and physical cost, and convinced of its commercial and political futility. However, the argument of this book is that, while imposing a system on this chaotic expansion was beyond the power of the imperial government in London, a system emerged nonetheless.

The characteristic of a system is the inter-dependence of its parts, on each other or with the centre of the system, and, as the system develops, the assumption by each of a specific function or role. In the British case, the most obvious forms of such inter-dependence were naval and military. This was not simply a matter of depending on Britain for strategic defence or for military aid in a localised struggle. British ability to provide naval protection or to send reinforcements to the scene of a conflict would have been very limited without the resources

the imperial system supplied. It was strategic control of the Cape Colony (whose economic value was derisory before 1870) that secured the naval gateway to Asia from European waters. The prime function of Egypt, occupied by the British in 1882, was to preserve British use of the Suez Canal and protect the 'Clapham Junction' of imperial communications. Malta, Aden, Ceylon, Singapore, Hong Kong, Esquimalt (on Vancouver Island), the Falklands and Halifax, Nova Scotia, formed the network of bases from which the Royal Navy patrolled the world's sea-lanes. India played several roles in the British world-system, but perhaps its critical function was to be the main base from which British interests in Asia could be advanced and defended. Indian soldiers and a British garrison paid for by Indian revenues were the 'strategic reserve' of the British system in Asia. Because India played this role, other British possessions and spheres east and south of Suez were largely exempted from the costs of defence – a fact of crucial importance to their economic viability.

Commercially, too, this systemic inter-dependence became more and more striking. Both colonial territories and 'informal' colonies had to compete for investment and credits from London to expand their economies. They had to find and meet an external demand to earn the overseas income to fund their borrowing needs. They had to produce the specialised exports (staples) that would command the best price in London's commodity markets. In return, with the grand exception of the United States (which had received one-fifth of British foreign investment by 1913), British capital was shuttled by the City of London between the various sectors of its commercial empire (a vast global realm among whose key provinces were Canada, Argentina, India, Australia, Southern Africa, China and the Middle East), employing a calculus of prospective return and speculative gain.[2]

Demographically, also, there were strong systemic influences at work. Britain was the reservoir. Although two-thirds of British migrants went to the United States up until 1900, almost all the rest were distributed between the four main settlement zones of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Indeed, their economic development was usually seen as being closely dependent upon drawing labour and skills from the British supply (South Africa was a partial exception to this rule). In British opinion, the value of migration in creating overseas markets, relieving domestic distress and creating 'Arcadias' free from industrialism, turned the emigrant flow into a form of social renewal and the settlement colonies into prospective 'new Britains'. Nor was

'old' Britain the only well-spring of migration. Between 1834 and 1937, India exported some 30 million people to other British possessions as indentured labour, and perhaps one-fifth remained as permanent settlers. In the tropical empire (which British migrants avoided) they supplied much of the labour and business expertise to promote commercial expansion.

Lastly, the spheres of British expansion were progressively linked by a complex system of communication. From the 1840s onwards, this was provided by subsidised mail services, telegraph wires, undersea cables, an expanding rail network, fast passenger steamers and (in the twentieth century) imperial air routes. They catered for, and stimulated, the growing volume and frequency of the traffic in news, information, private correspondence, personnel and ideas that flowed between Britain and other parts of the system, as well as between those constituent parts. By the late nineteenth century, it has been persuasively argued, an 'imperial press system' had come into being.[3] It supplied London with news as well as buying it back from London-based agencies (a perfect feedback loop), a process accompanied by the circulation of journalists and the diffusion of newspaper practice. The supply of magazines, newspapers and books from Britain was supplemented by a small outward phalanx of teachers, academics and scientific experts. 'Imperial' associations sprang up to pool the experience of businessmen, doctors, surveyors, engineers, foresters, agronomists, teachers and journalists. To an extent we are gradually beginning to notice, the return flows of experience, scientific information and academic talent exerted a powerful influence upon elite culture in Britain.

None of this is to argue that the British world-system was closed or exclusive, let alone self-sufficient. The reverse was the case. Its geopolitical equilibrium required quite specific conditions: a 'passive' East Asia, a European balance, and a strong but unaggressive United States. If those conditions broke down, the imperial archipelago, strung across the world, would soon start to look fragile. British elites – in Canada, Australasia and India as well as in Britain itself – were well aware of this frailty, and more and more so after 1900. Secondly, the British system was also highly exposed to the global economy that took shape with astonishing speed between 1870 and 1914. Britain's overseas earnings derived partly at least from carrying and financing the trade of third parties, brokered through London. The circuit of payments that allowed the huge growth of trade within the British world-system was

multilateral in scope.[4] India's deficit with Britain was met by the pro-
ceeds of its exports to Europe and the United States. Canada paid its
American deficit from its surplus with Britain. One-third of British trade
was with European markets and suppliers. Although there was room
for debate about what level of protection (if any) would secure the
best terms of trade for Britain and its system against the rest of the
world, an open global economy not a set of 'mercantilist' blocs seemed
the economic corollary of the British system's survival for most of the
century after 1840. Thirdly, while the British system promoted certain
cultural affinities (most strongly between its English-speaking commu-
nities) and proclaimed a liberal ideology (in practice applied by author-
itarian means in India and elsewhere in the tropical empire), it was
not a closed cultural world. Its external borders were easily permeable,
and open to influences from America, Europe and Russia (after 1917),
from the intellectual heartlands of the Islamic world, and even from
China and Japan (whose revolt against the West was much admired by
Gandhi). Internally, too, 'British' culture coexisted uneasily with indige-
nous cultures and those of non-British settlers. By the late nineteenth
century, it faced strong cultural movements in India, forms of cultural
nationalism in French Canada, Ireland and among the Cape Afrikan-
ers, and was feebly equipped to attempt a cultural 'mission' among its
new African subjects. The angry assertiveness of some British cultural
'messengers' and their periodic fits of despondency reflected not their
calm superiority (as is sometimes assumed) but a mood often closer to
a siege mentality.

A history of the British world-system must take account of
these facts. First, British *possessions* (coloured red on the map) may
loom large in the story, but only as parts of the larger conglomerate.
Secondly, while the political, economic and cultural history of different
colonial (and semi-colonial) territories can be studied up to a point as
a local affair, the links between them and other parts of the system
exerted a critical if variable influence on their politics, economics and
culture. The limits of British concession to Indian nationalism would
be inexplicable without the fact of India's contribution to 'imperial
defence', just as the goals of the pre-1914 Congress make little sense
except as a claim to be treated on terms of equality with the 'white
dominions' of the 'British world'. Canada's extraordinary commitment
of men in two world wars – the greatest traumas of its twentieth-century
history – derived fundamentally from a sense of its shared identity as

a 'British nation'. The survival of Afrikanerdom in South Africa – the central fact of *its* twentieth-century history – was the prize for success in fighting the British to a virtual stalemate in 1899–1902, exploiting their fear (as Smuts had foreseen) that keeping their army too long on the veld would endanger too many vital interests elsewhere. Only the parochialism of most British historians has veiled the pervasive effects of Britain's external connections on its institutions and outlook: the huge migrant flows, the vast overseas wealth, the 'imperial' monarchy, the cultural confidence bred by the sense of enduring 'centrality' in a globalised world. Thirdly, 'British connections' were dynamic not static. Their strength and solidity at any particular time were powerfully (perhaps decisively) shaped by the play of economic and geopolitical forces at the global not just imperial level.

But how to write such a history? It plainly cannot be done as a series of parallel histories of regions and colonies, whose distinctive development and ultimate separation form the *Leitmotif* of their story. This is the 'nationalist' historiography in which 'British connection' is an alien force, and a barrier to nationhood with all that it promised. In 'national' histories, links forged by migrations and the flows of goods and ideas retreat to the margins, or form the static backdrop to the national 'project'. But nor can it be done as a grandiose study in 'imperial policy', as if decisions taken in Whitehall, and the thinking behind them, were the dominant force in the fate of the system. Quite apart from the limits to imperial authority imposed by local conditions and external pressures, the 'policy-makers' rarely had a free rein to decide what British (or imperial) interests were, let alone how to preserve them. Least of all will it help to fall back upon a crude stereotyping of conflicting 'imaginaries', in which 'British' conceptions of mastery are contrasted with the values of their indigenous subjects. Although their widely different assumptions about race, gender and class shaped the British connection with almost every part of the world, there was no single pattern of 'hegemonic' assertion and local response. British opinions were not monolithic (since Britain was a complex and pluralistic society) and changed over time. The same could be said of almost every society into which British influence was inserted. Most important of all, discerning the impact of 'imaginings', 'representations' or 'colonial knowledge' requires something more than a sampling of texts: the careful reconstruction of economic and political contexts must be the starting point of enquiry.

Even a book as lengthy as this one could not hope to do justice
to the multiple threads that bound different places to Britain and to
other parts of its system. Instead, its main focus is upon what might be
called 'imperial politics': the almost continual debate over the terms of
association by which the various member states (including Britain itself)
were bound to the British system. This was not simply the question of
whether some form of independence was preferable – for most of the
time, this was hardly practical politics. It was more often a matter of
the limits of local autonomy; of how far British values (especially rep-
resentative government) were being respected in practice (a key issue in
India); of what place in the system colonial states should aspire to; how
much influence they should wield over the general direction of policy
(especially in matters of external defence); and whether the benefits and
burdens of empire were being shared fairly between them. Politicians
in states like Argentina or Egypt, without formal ties to the Empire,
but with no means of escape from the British embrace, faced much the
same issues. So in their own way did political leaders in Britain, which,
together with India, met the main costs of imperial defence. Of course,
this debate was not only conducted between organs of colonial and
British opinion, or between colonial spokesmen and imperial official-
dom. It divided parties and factions in each member territory where
religion, ethnicity and regional interests, as well as private ambition,
helped determine the outcome.

The theme of this book, then, is the continuous interplay of
two sorts of tensions. The first was internal: the chronic disagreements
over how the British system should work, usually expressed as political
conflict over the connection with Britain or 'British connection'. The
second was external. The meaning of 'British connection' – its prestige
and appeal, its perceived costs and benefits – was pulled this way and
that by the 'exogenous' forces of the global environment. The unpre-
dictable shifts in the shape of world politics; geopolitical change and
the rise of new powers; boom, bubble and bust in the global econ-
omy; the unforeseen impact of ideological movements and their conta-
gious appeal: their collective effect was to create an 'external' arena of
extraordinary turbulence before 1900, and of volcano-like chaos in the
twentieth century. On their rollercoaster ride through modern world
history, the most powerful units of the British world system were at
times flung together by centripetal attraction, at times sucked apart as
if about to spin off into separate trajectories. We know of course that,

in the great crisis of empire in 1940–2, the system all but broke up and never fully recovered. But, up until then, it had seemed axiomatic that, in one form or another, with more local freedom or less, the bond of empire would hold and the system endure.

What then were the system's most powerful components whose adhesion mattered most to its chance of survival? The most important by far was the imperial centre: the British Isles, yoked together for most of the period in a British 'Union' or by the 'dominion' relationship with Southern Ireland between 1921 and 1948. This composite 'Britain' (more often called 'England' after its dominant element) supplied much of the energy that the system demanded. Its huge financial resources, vast manufacturing output and enormous coal reserves (its so-called 'Black Indies' of a thousand coalfields)[5] made Britain a commercial and industrial titan, whose principal rivals, the United States and Germany, engaged much less in trade or traded mainly with Europe. Even by the late 1880s, Britain disposed of more (steam) horsepower per head than any other state, including the United States.[6] Its large surplus of manpower (the product of birth-rate and prevailing social conditions) fuelled Britain's 'demographic imperialism', the human capacity to stock the settlement colonies and maintain their British complexion, despite a much larger migrant stream to the United States. Britain was also at all times a great power in Europe, and able to use its leverage there as part of the general defence of its interests worldwide. The great strategic bonus of this European role, until the inter-war years, was that the main source of its power in European politics, the world's largest deep-sea navy, could also be used to uphold the oceanic supremacy first grasped at Trafalgar in 1805. Britain also possessed a set of cultural assets whose value is harder to quantify but is of crucial importance. In their institutional form, these were the clubs and societies, associations and leagues, patrons, sponsors and churches (as well as government agencies) through whom information and knowledge of the world beyond Europe was collected, collated, digested and diffused to the public at large or to a more privileged few. Not the least of the attributes that Britain contributed to the overall strength of its system was as a great cultural entrepot.

In the world east of Suez, the indispensable element in British world power was India. Imperial India was more than the countries of modern 'South Asia'. It was 'Greater India': a 'sub-empire' ruled from Calcutta (and Simla), extending from Aden to Burma, and with its own

sphere of influence in the Persian Gulf, Southwest Iran, Afghanistan and (for some of the time) Tibet. 'Greater India' might even include coastal East Africa, whose metropole was Bombay until the late nineteenth century, and the 'Straits Settlements' of the Malayan peninsula, ruled from Calcutta into the late 1860s. The agrarian revenues of the Indian 'heartland' paid for a British-officered Indian army and after 1860 for a large British garrison, between a third and a half of Britain's regular army. Of the peace-time strength of the British and Indian armies – together almost the whole regular land force of the British world-system – the Indian taxpayer paid for nearly two-thirds. India's internal market, pegged open by rule, and its return on investment, underwritten by government, was a major contributor to British employment (India was the largest market for Britain's principal export) and to Britain's balance of payments. India's ports and railways (the largest network outside the West), its merchants, migrants and labourers, its British-owned banks and agency-houses, and its strategic position on the marine trunk road to East Asia, made up the engine of Anglo-Indian expansion, an enterprise under both British and Indian management. By the late nineteenth century, it was hard to imagine how this intricate fusion of British and Indian interests could be prised apart without disaster for both.

The third great component of the British world-system was not territorial. It might almost be thought of as a 'virtual India': a vast abstract realm of assets and interests. This was the hinterland of the City of London, a 'commercial republic' bound together by self-interest not rule, but containing within it a fast-growing 'empire' of British-owned property. The jewel in the crown of this empire of commerce was the deep-sea merchant marine, much of it serving non-British customers, but earning a huge income remitted to its owners at home. It was closely paralleled by British-owned railways: like the Great Indian Peninsular and the East Indian Railway, the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Great Southern Railway in Argentina, or the humbler 'Simon Bolivar' in Northern Venezuela. Banks and insurance companies, shipping agents and packers, and a mass of installations including utilities, harbour-works, telegraph companies (like the globe-spanning 'Great Eastern'), plantations, mines, and concessions for oil, also helped to ensure that the profits Britain drew from the growth of world trade were second to none. By the 1890s, the income that was drawn from these overseas assets and the invisible income from shipping and services was