

1 EMPIRES CONSTRUCTED AND CONTESTED

In the beginning, European empires were improvised. They were constructed from three strands: networks of trade, colonial settlements and land-based military empires. For a long time these existed independently or overlapped in different parts of the globe. They were often parasitic on existing non-European empires such as the Mughal, the Ottoman and the Chinese. Empires were reinvented in response to new challenges such as international competition between the great powers or resistance by indigenous peoples under their control. They were restructured, their disparate provinces brought together and under centralised administration. Non-European empires were cast aside and territorial European empires took their place. Myths were developed to legitimate empires: they were presented as forces for good – bringing wealth, or order, or civilisation. In the end, however, they were based on violence and maintained by force. The extension of trade required force of arms to underpin it. Colonial settlements brought the expropriation of people from their ancestral homelands. Territorial rule enshrined the power and prestige of the European elites at the expense of non-Europeans. Revolt and rebellion by indigenous peoples who often used European ideologies of liberty and equality against their masters were ruthlessly suppressed. By 1914 empires were defended not only by the armies and taxes they raised locally but by doctrines of white supremacy and the civilising mission.

Trade, Settlement and Power

For a long time the British and French Empires were not huge continental territories but networks of trade. In his *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 Adam Smith described Britain as a ‘great mercantile republic’, an interpretation that has been endorsed by historian John Darwin.¹ This concept was developed by Gallagher and Robinson’s concept of ‘free trade imperialism’ and by Cain and Hopkins as a ‘gentlemanly capitalism’ which combined trade with financial backing, much of which derived from the landed interest.² In practice, however, trading networks were scarcely free trading or gentlemanly. The production of colonial goods for import was based on enslavement of African peoples and the slave trade. Merchant fleets were armed and indulged in ‘armed trading’ that could scarcely be distinguished from piracy.³ Chartered companies exercised sovereign powers and raised armies. ‘Small wars’ were launched to break down obstacles to free trade and money was lent to the rulers of defeated powers which, if defaulted upon, might lead to a direct imperial takeover.

The Caribbean plantation economy was based on slavery and the slave trade. Jamaica was acquired by the British in 1655 and imported 470,000 slaves between 1703 and 1778; high mortality meant that in 1788 the slave population on the island was less than 40 per cent of what it should have been. The slave trade and import and re-export of colonial produce such as sugar made the fortunes of Bristol and Bordeaux in the seventeenth centuries, and of Liverpool and Nantes in the eighteenth. It also sustained the landed elites who invested in the trade and owned plantations. In 1789 Jamaica yielded profits of 4 per cent but the French colony of Saint-Domingue yielded 12 per cent. Wars were repeatedly fought in the eighteenth century between Britain, France and Spain for control of the slave trade, the sugar islands and their vast profits.

The French Revolution with its doctrines of liberty and equality wrought havoc in the Caribbean. It destabilised relations between the 40,000 Europeans, 28,000 mulattos and free blacks and 450,000 black slaves on Saint-Domingue. The gospel of equal rights provoked a revolt of 100,000 slaves in August 1791, burning plantations and massacring the planters, and former slave Toussaint Louverture took command of a slave army. French armies were unable to restore order and the Republic indeed abolished slavery in 1794. By that time the terrified

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planters had invited the British to intervene to defend their position, but yellow fever killed off 15,000 of the 25,000 soldiers by 1798, when they had to withdraw. In 1802 Napoleon Bonaparte decided to reimpose slavery and French order, sending in 34,000 battle-hardened soldiers and sailors, but they were also overcome by disease and slave resistance. Although Toussaint Louverture was captured and froze to death in the French Alps, the Republic of Haiti was proclaimed in 1804 after the first successful anti-colonial revolt.⁴

This was not the usual pattern of events. Military superiority usually ensured the supremacy of European traders. In the eighteenth century trade with India was a monopoly of the East India Company and the *Compagnie française des Indes*. They established settlements or *comptoirs* as hubs of trade and negotiated trading terms with the princely vassals of the Mughal emperor. However, they were not only traders; they were empowered by royal charters to exercise political power to appoint governors and governors-general and to raise armies. The conquest of territory meant more men and more revenue for the company. Military men and governors such as Joseph-François Dupleix, down to 1754, and Robert Clive from 1756, bribed some princes with protection money, the better to take control, and eliminated those who challenged them by force. Clive defeated the Nawab or governor of Bengal at Plassey in 1757, cleared out the French from Bengal and was himself made governor of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by the Mughal emperor in 1765. As what became known as a nabob, he made a vast fortune plundering India, which led to an investigation by the House of Commons, and is partly blamed for the Bengal famine of 1779–83.⁵ Meanwhile the army of the East India Company, composed of Europeans and Indian sepoys, now became a serious colonial force, growing from 25,000 in 1768 to 40,000 in 1784 and 65,000 in 1814.⁶

One reason behind this growth of military power was the challenge of France to Britain's influence in the Ottoman Empire and to its trade routes to India. This led to a generation of warfare between the two empires. An armada under Napoleon Bonaparte landed in Alexandria on 1 July 1798, defeated the Mameluk slave army of the Ottomans at the Battle of the Pyramids on 21 July and entered Cairo in triumph. Napoleon's fleet was destroyed by Nelson at Aboukir Bay but he fought his way north into Syria, laying siege to Acre before pulling back and returning to France to seize power. In India, the British under Governor-General Richard Wellesley and his brothers Arthur and

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Henry responded by crushing princes loyal to the French, such as Tipu, Sultan of Mysore, in 1799, and the Maratha confederacy at the Battle of Assaye in 1803.⁷ Britain also benefited from wars against France's satellites or allies – the Dutch, the Spanish and the Irish. Britain took Cape colony from the Dutch in 1795 and again in 1806 and attacked Java in the Dutch East Indies in 1811. Britain exploited France's occupation of Spain in 1808, which provoked independence movements in Spain's Latin American colonies and gave Britain the opportunity to force trade and investment links onto the emerging countries. Buenos Aires was attacked in 1806 and Montevideo in 1807. Meanwhile, when the French Republic supported the Irish rebellion of 1798, Britain imposed full control over Ireland by the 1800 Act of Union.

After the destruction of his fleet at Trafalgar, Napoleon concentrated on building a European land empire. Britain was excluded from trading with it by Napoleon's Continental System, while Britain in turn imposed a blockade on Napoleonic Europe. In 1807, meanwhile, Britain abolished the slave trade, but in order not to be at a disadvantage forced France and Spain to abolish their own slave trades, if necessary by boarding their ships and bombing slave ports on Africa's west coast. Increasingly after 1815 Britain moved towards free trade, symbolised by the foundation of the port of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles, former lieutenant-governor of Java, in 1819. Free trade, however, required powers such as the Ottoman Empire to abolish customs and monopolies that hindered that trade. When in 1831 the Ottoman Empire faced a revolt of its governor in Egypt, Muhammed Ali Pasha, who invaded Syria and threatened Constantinople, the sultan turned to Britain for help and was obliged to accept a free trade treaty in 1838. The Crimean War of 1854–6 against Russia then obliged Constantinople to accept loans from Britain, funnelled through the Imperial Ottoman Bank, which further increased British control of her economy.⁸ This was later characterised as 'informal empire', trade and investment without direct administration.

The French likewise sought to exploit the difficulties of the Ottoman Empire, whose vassals wielded power across North Africa. After the defeat of Napoleon's continental empire in 1814–15 the French monarchy began to rebuild its empire outside Europe. After the Dey of Algiers threw French traders out of the ports of Bône and La Calle (El Kala), a French force of 30,000 sailed from Toulon and seized control of Algiers on 5 July 1830. Algeria was proclaimed

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a military colony under a governor-general in 1834 but the French took fifteen years to defeat an alliance of Arab tribes under the brilliant leadership of young Islamic scholar and warlord Abd al-Qadir, who founded a fledgling Islamic state.⁹ No serious progress was made against him until the return of General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud as governor-general in 1841 with an Army of Africa of French and Algerian auxiliaries that built up to 100,000. A veteran of the Peninsula War against Spanish guerrillas, he ordered razzias or punitive expeditions against the rebels, destroying crops and villages, stealing herds, raping or kidnapping women. Another tool of terror was the *enfumade*. In June 1845 he smoked at least 700 tribespeople to death in the caves of Dahra where they had taken refuge. Two months later one of his colonels, Saint-Arnaud, reported that in another cave ‘I hermetically closed all the exits and made a vast cemetery. The earth will cover the bodies of these fanatics for ever [...] Only I know that underneath there are five hundred brigands who will not slit Frenchmen’s throats any more.’ About 825,000 Algerians died in the period 1830–75, to which should be added 800,000 who died in the famine of 1867–8.¹⁰

The French also tried to reassert their position more peacefully in Egypt. Ferdinand de Lesseps had been consul in Egypt in the 1830s and befriended Saïd, the son of Mohammed Ali. When Saïd became ruler of Egypt in 1854 de Lesseps persuaded him agree to the building of a canal across the Isthmus of Suez both to develop trade and to restore France’s fortunes in the Orient. The British were hostile but were locked into an alliance with France fighting the Crimean War. A Suez Canal company was formed in 1858 and sold shares to 21,000 people, opening in 1869.¹¹ Meanwhile in 1852, Major Louis Faidherbe, who had served in Algeria, landed at Gorée in Senegal, on behalf of the merchants of Bordeaux who were interested in developing the palm oil trade. In 1854 he was made governor of Senegal and took on the Moorish empire of El Habj Omar. As a good pupil of Bugeaud and Saint-Arnaud, he did not hesitate to torch rebel villages. ‘We burned Ouadar, N’Tougent and Ker Seyni Diop in turn, without seeing the enemy who withdrew as we approached’, he told the minister in Paris in March 1858. ‘Then we had to destroy Ker M’Biram a N’Diaye, two kilometres to our left, one of the most hostile villages in the whole region.’¹²

Africa and the Middle East were the focus of much trading and colonial endeavour, but India was a fulcrum of empire and looked to impose trade on China to increase its revenues. This was not easy. When

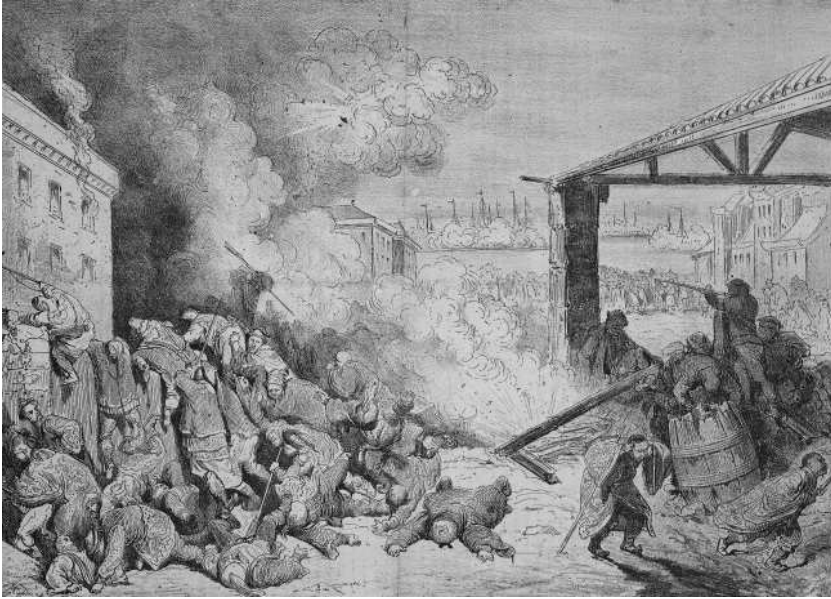


Figure 1.1 Armed trade: episode of the Second Opium War in China. Drawing by Gustave Doré (1832–1883), illustration from *Le Musée Français*, no. 41, May 1858. Getty Images / DEA / BIBLIOTECA AMBROSIANA / De Agostini / 931218102

Lord Macartney, a former governor of Madras, led an embassy to the emperor's court in 1793, and refused to kowtow, he was told bluntly, 'We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures.'¹³ Trade with China was permitted only through the strictly controlled port of Canton. This became intolerable when the East India Company lost its monopoly of Chinese trade in 1833. New companies such as Jardine, Matheson & Co were desperate to open up the Chinese market and found one product the Chinese were interested in: Indian-grown opium. After 40,000 chests were exported to China in 1838, the Chinese emperor ordered the opium trade to be stopped. Stocks were confiscated and British traders were imprisoned.

The British did not bother to negotiate. They sent in gunboats and the so-called Opium War of 1839–42 forced China to open her trade, allow British subjects to reside in five ports including Canton and Shanghai, and surrender Hong Kong to Queen Victoria in perpetuity (Figure 1.1). In 1858 the British took advantage of the challenge of the Taping rebellion to the emperor by forcing the doors of free trade on

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their terms even wider, and when the emperor resisted, marched on Peking and burned down his summer palace.¹⁴ The French joined in the fighting to demand their own trading stations. When this was refused they attacked and besieged Saigon in 1860–1 and obliged the emperor of Annam, a vassal of the Chinese emperor, to cede his southern provinces, which became the French colony in Cochinchina. ‘We must create a real empire in the Far East’, declared the French minister of the navy and colonies in 1863.¹⁵

Trade was one of the great engines of empire; another was colonial settlement. This was rather uneven, because empires like that of China did not welcome foreigners, and colonies in West Africa were very inhospitable. In temperate regions, however, settlement provided economic opportunities for populations from the home country and a means to project national solidarity into a wider sphere. The territory coveted by the settlers was not virgin; it was occupied by indigenous peoples. This did not deter the settlers who took up arms and the soldiers of the regular army who backed them. Settlement involved the expropriation of those who were already there, their removal from the land and very often their elimination.¹⁶

Australia was originally a penal colony, the destination of 825 ships with 163,000 British convicts, men and women mostly punished for theft, between 1788 and 1868. However, Edward Gibbon Wakefield, languishing in Newgate prison in 1827–30 for abducting an heiress, met convicts and realised that the sale of land in Australia could finance voluntary emigration so that ‘colonies would be an extension, though distant, of Britain itself’.¹⁷ Migrants numbering 44,000 in the 1830s and 84,000 in the 1840s – artisans facing hardship in the depression after the Napoleonic Wars, paupers condemned to the workhouse, or victims of the Irish famine – had their passage assisted by the British authorities. In the 1850s gold was discovered in the state of Victoria and the European population of Australia increased from 438,000 to 1,168,000 in a decade.¹⁸ The land, of course, was occupied by aboriginal populations, but these were simply cleared away and destroyed. A ‘Black Line’ was drawn in 1830 and an operation by British troops, convicts and settlers swept Tasmania and corralled the aborigines on Flinders Island and Oyster Bay. There the last Tasmanian aborigine, a 64-year-old woman called Truganini, died in 1876.¹⁹

Algeria was also originally populated by paupers and convicts. Assisted passages were offered after 1838 to struggling artisans and

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labourers needed to build roads, rather than to farmers.²⁰ Unemployed workers were detailed to building projects in ‘national workshops’ under the Second Republic in 1848. When these were closed as a security risk a popular uprising known as the June Days broke out. This was brutally put down and 4,000 prisoners were sent to Algeria along with 12,000 other former inmates of the national workshops. To these were added the thousands of opponents of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte’s coup d’état of 1851 who were deported. The defeat of Abd al-Qadir enabled the French government in Algeria to establish 200 villages for settlers, whose number multiplied from 131,000 to 189,000 between 1851 and 1857. Progress was slow and the threats to French power from the British Empire and Prussia, which defeated Austria in 1866, were great. In 1868 France’s answer to Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the liberal journalist Lucien-Anatole Prévost-Paradol, wrote that ‘Algeria should not be a *comptoir*, like India, or a training ground for our army [. . .] It is a French land which should be populated as soon as possible by French people [. . .] eighty or a hundred million French people, strongly rooted on both sides of the Mediterranean, will preserve the name, the language and the legitimate reputation of France’.²¹ Ninety years later the French would pay dearly for this ambition.

In Australia and Algeria, the colonising British and French were confronted by indigenous peoples. In Cape colony, which was essentially a British naval base, a small British settlement had to contend with a powerful community of Dutch settlers and their African and Asian slaves as well as indigenous African peoples. In 1834 the British antagonised the Dutch settlers by abolishing slavery, and 12–14,000 Dutch set off into the African interior on what became known as the Great Trek (Figure 1.2). This brought them into conflict with African chiefdoms, driving the Ndebele north and defeating the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River in 1838 before they settled in Natal. Meanwhile the British organised their own razzias east from the Cape, forcibly removing the Xhosa and killing their cattle, so that 40,000 died of starvation and 30,000 became labourers in Cape colony.²²

In Canada, British forces had used an American Indian confederacy under Shawneechief Tecumseh against the Americans in the War of 1812, but the Amerindians did not benefit. Between 1824 and 1844 their population in Upper (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec) fell from 18,000 to 12,000. Meanwhile unemployed British migrants, those cleared as surplus tenants by Scottish and Irish landlords, or fleeing the

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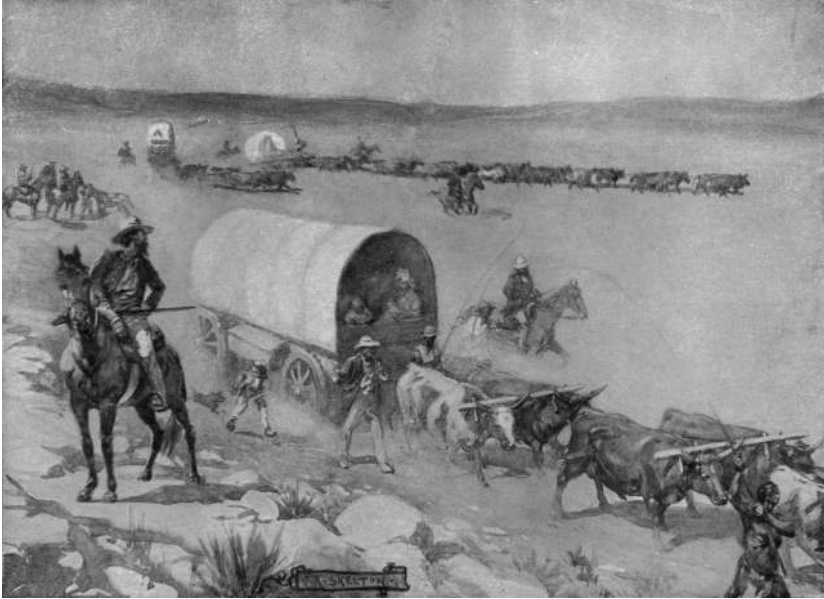


Figure 1.2 The myth of white settlement: the Great Trek of the Boers into the African interior. ‘The bullock-waggon wound slowly over the billowy plains’ (c.1908) from H. E. Marshall, *Our Empire Story* (1920).

Getty Images / Hulton Fine Art Collection / 533389780

Irish famine, came in greater numbers. They generally moved into Upper Canada, which was industrial as well as agricultural, and whose population multiplied by twenty between 1806 and 1861. A gold strike on the Fraser River in British Columbia in 1857 led to an invasion of 25,000 goldseekers, land grabs and wars with local Amerindian tribes.²³ The British were keen for Canada to flourish economically and to maintain its security against the United States. They negotiated a free trade treaty between Canada and the United States in 1854 and British banks promoted a railway between Quebec and Halifax, Nova Scotia. Meanwhile in 1860 they abandoned responsibility for protecting the Amerindians to the Canadian authorities, effectively giving them *carte blanche* to eliminate the tribespeople.²⁴

Questions of trade and settlement ultimately involved questions of power. Empires were developed to build the strategic might of the metropolitan power and they needed to be secure. This posed questions of governance. Were colonies to be governed from the metropolis, more or less despotically, or afforded a certain degree of self-government?

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In this respect, Canada was at one end of the spectrum. The size of British investments and the importance of security persuaded the British government to bring the Canadian provinces into a confederation, and for this to enjoy a broad degree of self-government under the Crown, in return for funding its own defence. This was accorded by dominion status in 1867.²⁵

At the other end of the spectrum was India. Pressures on the East India Company and its army steadily increased as external threats through Afghanistan from Persia and Russia intensified. Burma was annexed after a war in 1824–6 and Sind and the Punjab were annexed after the Afghan War of 1839–42. In 1857 the Bengal army mutinied against what it considered tyrannical and immoral British rule and has been seen as a first jihad against their hegemony.²⁶ The following year Britain decided finally to depose the Mughal emperor and impose direct rule from London, through a Secretary of State for India. The governor-general became viceroy, the army was henceforth recruited not in unreliable Bengal but mostly in the Punjab, which had remained loyal in 1857, and an Indian civil service was created, drawn from the best British public schools. The princes who continued to rule outside the Raj were integrated as feudal lords, bedecked with new honours. To convey the majesty of the new British Raj, Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1876, the capital was moved from the busy port of Calcutta to the old imperial city of Delhi, and the princes rallied to the viceroy in a highly staged ceremony there of 84,000 people on 1 January 1877. The décor and uniforms were designed by Lockwood Kipling, director of the art school at Bombay; his 12-year-old son Rudyard was at boarding school in England. The mercantile republic was now eclipsed by imperial hubris.²⁷

Algeria was like a hybrid between India and Canada. The indigenous population was subject to military despotism while the European settler population increasingly called the shots. Napoleon III visited Algeria in 1860 and declared that ‘our African possession is not an ordinary colony but an Arab kingdom’. Rumours spread that he wanted to make Abd el Kader its viceroy. This was not to be. The Algerian population in the countryside were governed after 1844 by the army’s ‘Arab bureaux’. A French law of 1863 permitted vast tracts of land to be confiscated from the indigenous populations, who were corralled into smaller and smaller regions and suffered a terrible famine in 1867–8. Another law of 1865 deemed Algerian