

## Critical Overview of Britain and its Empire with a Special Reference to their Ups and Downs

<sup>1</sup>Dr SEGUEDEME Alexis Hergie, <sup>2</sup>Dr BOSSOUN Koumabé ,  
<sup>3</sup>Dr ABODOHOUI Olivier Orierien

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Enseignant-Chercheur à l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Rép. Bénin

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**ABSTRACT:** Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain has progressively dominated many countries far beyond its home frontiers. The empire instituted by the British colonisation, surely was the greatest in history and has importantly impacted the whole world in terms of politics, economy and society. Those numerous impacts are still noticeable today and may be appreciated differently. In order to develop common knowledge about Britain and its empire, a qualitative method has been used to carry out this study. The study takes a look at what actually happened during the age of the British Empire, emphasising on key elements. Doing this with a critical approach, it has finally been concluded that the empire's repercussions are not only negative but positive as well.

**KEYWORDS:** Britain, British colonisation, British Empire.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Different past civilisations have been under study for their advanced achievements which fascinated and still fascinate researchers. One of those interesting civilisations is the one developed by Britain, formally referred more to as the United Kingdom. In fact, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK), currently headed by King Charles III, is a superpower among the leading states of the world. In 2022 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the European giant was about \$2,76 trillion according to the World Bank, making it the 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world and the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest economy in Europe, just behind Germany. Considering these few but quite impressive evidence, one may wonder: How did the United Kingdom arrive to achieve such an outstanding status? The history of the country offers several answers to that interesting question depending on how far it goes back to the past. A recent factor is the rise of the service sector. It has contributed around 80% of the UK's GDP during the last years. Another factor is probably the important contribution of agriculture which played a vital and unique role a longer time ago. However, the most determinant elements justifying the distinguished economic position of the United Kingdom are surely found on the historic pages covered by the British Empire. What has really happened at the time when Britain was an imperial power and how did that empire impact the world until nowadays? Pursuing solutions to that preoccupation is the reason behind this research work entitled, "*Critical Overview of Britain and Its Empire with a Special Reference to their Ups and Downs*". The work for its content to be fully and well apprehended is subdivided in three chapters which are respectively named and categorised as follows: Introduction to the Study; The History and the Features of the British Empire; Critical Assessment of the British Empire's Legacy.

### II. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

**Problem Statement:** Uncountable events have taken place during the several decades covered by the British Empire and thus make it a very tricky subject to handle. That is, from its institution to its decline, the lifetime history of that empire is quite huge, actually full of elements and still generates divergent contemporary understandings. Therefore, there is a need for a research work that suggests an elaborated critical overview of Britain and its Empire with a special reference to their ups and downs during the imperial era.

**Significance of the Study:** This study is undoubtedly important because it provides a lot of information about the late Britain and its Empire. Thereby it also helps to understand modern issues related to that empire and to an evident extent it thus stands as a memory for policymakers about necessary and suitable actions to be taken. Additionally, this study serves as a preparatory work for further research on the British Empire. It also represents a possible teaching material in English history and civilisation classes.

**Purpose of the Study:** The primary purpose of this work is to enrich the existing knowledge about Britain and its Empire by providing a more comprehensive understanding. In addition, it also aims at giving an easy but strong insight on the British Empire especially for low-level students in the departments of English of universities around the world.

**Scope of the Study:** There is no pretension of an absolutely complete study here. The use of the term “overview” is a proof already showing that reality. So, indeed, there are probably missing areas of the relatively broad subject of Britain and its Empire that can be investigated by later research. The paper as far as it is concerned emphasises on the British Empire as the sum of Britain plus its colonies and mostly covers it on the historical and civilisational grounds from the 17<sup>th</sup> century up to the 20<sup>th</sup> one.

**Research Methodology :** In order to produce a critical study of Britain and its Empire, disciplined qualitative research has been conducted. Both by consulting libraries and using key words in search engines on the internet, textual data about the British Empire have been gathered from reliable primary as well as secondary sources that have carefully been evaluated. This method was the most suitable to the research because of its civilisational and historical characteristics. The data collected have been verified, categorised, closely examined and then, based upon them, the critical analysis of the empire and its legacy has been elaborated.

### III. THE HISTORY AND THE FEATURES OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

#### The Historical Timeline of the British Empire

**The Early British Empire :** The history of the British Empire finds its very beginnings in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when Britain has initiated its first colonial experience, in Ireland. In “*Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature*”, Seamus Deane reflects on the nature of the British rule in Ireland:

The British domination of Ireland was not just a matter of military conquest and political control; it also involved a systematic attempt to destroy Irish culture, language and identity. The English sought to impose their own language, laws, and religion on the Irish, often with violent force. They also expropriated land from the Irish, and imposed economic policies that favored English interests over Irish ones. The result was a long history of poverty, oppression, and resistance that has left a deep imprint on Irish society and culture. (25)<sup>1</sup>

This portrayal made by Deane is exact. Moreover, during the years spent in what can be seen as their Irish “laboratory”<sup>2</sup> according to Rahman, Clarke and Byrne (17), the British have successfully learned the art of colonialism, an art that they could reproduce elsewhere. Britain went farther in its attempt to increase its involvement overseas through the East India Company, a union of British traders which was founded in 1600 and started trading abroad, especially in the Indian subcontinent. However, by the time it was much in a pacific way and negotiations with local rulers, as the main purpose was still trading activities. The true step forward in territorial expansion was going on in the western part of the world, the Americas. The Americas actually were firstly occupied in their southern part by the Spanish and Portuguese forces but closely later, the British successfully established in 1607 a first settlement colony, Jamestown in Virginia. Along with profit making, religious and political matters represent another main reason for many British people to join settlements abroad, fleeing persecution and looking for freedom. Unsurprisingly then, many other colonies were rapidly developed on the American eastern coast, including Rhode Island, Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina and the last one, Georgia. In addition to these thirteen colonies, they were others in the Caribbeans (Barbados, Jamaica, Bahamas and Dominica) and in northern America (The English-speaking part of Canada and Gibraltar).

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<sup>1</sup> Deane, Seamus. *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880-1980*. London: Faber & Faber. 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Rahman, Aziz, Mary A. Clarke and Sean Byrne. “The Art of Breaking People Down: The British Colonial Model in Ireland and Canada”. *Peace Research*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2017, pp. 15-38.

**The Peak of the British Empire :** In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, uprisings have started in the main British colonies of America against the homeland. This has led to the American Revolution War (1775-1783) whose aftermath saw the birth of the United States of America (US). In his book entitled “*The American Revolution: A History*”, Gordon S. Wood has argued:

The American War of Independence was a turning point in world history, marking the emergence of the United States as a new nation and challenging the dominant power of Britain. The war was the culmination of a long period of tension and conflict between Britain and its American colonies, which were increasingly dissatisfied with British rule and taxation policies. The American victory in the war had far-reaching consequences, inspiring [future] movements for independence and democracy around the world. (1)<sup>3</sup>

Wood’s version thus confirms the American success in winning. However, what he did not say there is that Britain after the war still possesses its minor colonies around Canada and the Caribbean which did not join the rebellion. Despite the loss of its thirteen main colonies which became independent, Britain’s imperial ambitions were not weakened. They got higher instead, when Britain has operated what is known as a “swing to the east”. That shift was firstly carried out by the East India Company. The Company which was already established in India for trade took a much more political and military dimension supported by the Royal Navy. Later on, the British dominance in Asia went beyond the Indian subcontinent.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, British ‘white’ colonies have been developed in Australia and New Zealand with rapidly growing settlements (1788), the reason being that they firstly served as the exile destination where to deport exceeding numbers of criminals in British prisons which were filled. Those prisoners were given the opportunity to reconvert and cultivate lands like other free settlers. From another side, by 1881 with the “scramble for Africa” by European powers to prevent pending wars over the territories there, many African countries came under the British rule. In fact:

During the scramble for Africa, Britain became one of the dominant colonial powers on the continent, acquiring a vast array of territories and resources. From Egypt in the north to South Africa in the south; British influence was felt across the continent, with colonies, protectorates and spheres of influence covering more than 30% of the total land area of Africa (Cain and Hopkins 98)<sup>4</sup>

Overall, at its culminating point, the British Empire was the one on which ‘the sun never sets’. It was composed of almost one quarter of the world territories and had about one quarter of the world population. This, as Trevor Lloyd (1) put it, has never been seen before or since.<sup>5</sup>

**The Fall of the British Empire :** The early 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed the First World War (WWI), from 1914 to 1918. It has opposed Britain to Germany, each one with its allies. The British allies won the war but important damages were caused to every side. It was the starting point of the decline of the British Empire. Two decades later, from 1939 to 1945 took place the Second World War (WWII) opposing approximately the same actors of the first one due to the Nazi expansionism. Britain eventually was once again among the winners but as a result, its weakening imperial situation was worsened by the loss of key colonies, the rise of the US as a new global power and heavy debts. “It is difficult to remain an empire when it is almost bankrupt”,<sup>6</sup> argues Spencer (14).

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<sup>3</sup> Wood, Gordon S. *The American Revolution: A History*. New York: Modern Library, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Cain, Peter J., and Anthony G. Hopkins. *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914*. London: Longman, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd, Trevor. *Empire: A History of the British Empire*. England: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Spencer, H. J. “A Critical Review/Essay of *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* by Lawrence James (1994). *Britannia*, June 2020.

However, the resulting main factor characterising this situation of growing imperial weakness was the independence movements. In other words, the decline of the British empire was hastened by the rising tide of nationalism in its colonies and the increasing demand for self-rule (Porter).<sup>7</sup> All those feelings led to independence movements in most of the British overseas possessions, and almost all of them have got their freedom by the 1990s.

### **The Political, Economic and Sociocultural Features of the British Empire**

**The British Imperial Administration:** To administer its overseas possessions and population, the British imperial power has used a complex and evolving system shaped by two main forms of governance respectively referred to as the direct and the indirect rules. The direct rule was the older one. In this form of rule, colonial governors, supported by a web of other British officials, were appointed in colonies by the British monarch. Their role was to govern by maintaining order locally and implementing the policies and decisions made by the central government based in London. This kind of governance was mainly observed in the British “white” colonies such as America, Australia, New Zealand.

The indirect rule by its side was more intermediary than the direct rule in the sense that it consisted in relying on autonomous tribal chiefs to maintain control, or appointing indigenous people willing to collaborate and implement assigned policies at local levels on behalf of the central colonial government. Anderson supports that idea when he says, “The British imperial administration relied heavily on the support of indigenous elites, who were often co-opted into the system of colonial governance and given a degree of power and influence”.<sup>8</sup> No matter how direct or indirect the British rule was, the Royal Navy was often vital whenever the British imperial interests in its colonies were threatened by internal or external factors.

**Mercantilism and the Industrial Revolution:** The British Empire, as far as its economy is concerned, could rely upon two main parameters which are mercantilism and the Industrial Revolution. British mercantilism, as Rothschild has explained, “was a system of economic regulation designed to enrich the mother country and strengthen its power [...]”.<sup>9</sup> It implied accumulating and controlling valuable resources, boosting exports and restricting imports through various policies. With this philosophy, key events which saw the British involvement were surely the Slave Trade and the Plunder of Bengal. With the enormous wealth they generated they directly fuelled the Industrial Revolution. The British Industrial Revolution from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a multifaceted process, driven by a range of factors including technological innovation, economic incentives, and social and political conditions, according to Allen.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it was an unexpected and rapid shift from manual labour to key technological and mechanical innovations. As it all began in Britain before spreading to other parts of the world, the Industrial Revolution definitely made the country and its empire unchallenged economically speaking.

**Social and Cultural Aspects :** Society during the age of the British Empire has actually been marked by several changes in Britain itself as well as in colonies. First of all, throughout the Industrial Revolution social class problems could be observed in Europe with important inequalities in terms of working conditions, wages and living conditions. Along with social class inequalities, systematic child labour; rural exodus, with a subsequent rapid growth of populations and cities were very noticeable. In addition, some other important issues were environmental degradation and aggravated pollution; multiple disease outbreaks and inadequate healthcare, and finally the Great Famine in Ireland. To wider levels, the numerous clashes and wars from regional cases to the two great world wars, including their consequences are other key aspects that have characterised society during the imperial era. The rebellions and acts of resistance against the injustices of the British rule across the empire,

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<sup>7</sup> Porter, Bernard. *The Lion's Share: Short History of British Imperialism 1850-2004*. London: Longman, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, David. *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. United States: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Rothschild, Emma. *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Allen, Robert C. *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*. England: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

added to the different waves of independence movements in the colonies to gain their freedom and sovereignty surely are also among the most remarkable social facts. From another side, the establishment of the British empire also was the one English as the dominant international language. In the same way, the Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) was imposed to several colonies by the British rulers and became the main international time standard. Paul Johnson, considering the Indian case, has told more in his article entitled “*The British Empire: A Force for Good?*” when he has argued:

As the British Empire Expanded, it imposed its culture and values on the colonized populations, often resulting in the suppression of local traditions and customs. This was particularly evident in India, where British Officials sought to impose Western-style education and social norms on the Indian people. As one colonial administrator put it, ‘we are here to teach the natives how to live, and in so-doing, to civilize them.’<sup>11</sup>

It appears in Johnson’s words that, in many regards the empire thus has created a mix or hybridity of cultures, but he did not emphasise on the religious area which perhaps was the one which has undergone the most significant effect.

#### IV. CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE’S LEGACY

##### Postcolonial Political and Economic Development

**Analysis of the Commonwealth of Nations :** Headed by the British monarch, the Commonwealth of Nations is a voluntary international association gathering the United Kingdom and fifty-three other independent countries, most of which are its former colonies. The main objectives of the Commonwealth are about promoting democracy, security, human rights, sustainable economic development and providing a framework for dealing with global issues like poverty and climate change. Therefore, Blick described it as a “unique organization”.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the organisation wants itself committed to diversity and cultural exchange. However, despite its incontestable potentials as far as international well-being and development around the world are concerned, the Commonwealth of Nations from another perspective may look like a modern or remade form of the British Empire to the extent that it is strongly linked to its colonial foundation and past.

**Effects of the Empire on Domestic Politics and Economy of Late Colonies :** For domestic politics in the late colonies, the empire has brought and left many institutions. It has introduced the parliamentary system of government which has been adopted by several states and is still used today along with the democracy, the rule of law and political stability it promotes. However, the parliamentary system sometimes fails before realities or contexts where it does not fit in and many countries are still struggling to establish stable political systems to face the challenges of government. Synchronically, there is also a “[...] dependence on [British] external actors, which continued to influence their domestic politics and economies long after independence”, as underlined by Thomas and Curless.<sup>13</sup> Coming back to the positive contribution of the British Empire, Niall Ferguson has asserted in his book “*Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*”:

The British Empire had a profound impact on the domestic politics and economy of many of its colonies. In some cases, this impact was positive, leading to modernization and economic growth. For example, in Singapore, the British introduced modern infrastructure, such as the port and airport, which transformed the country in a major trading hub. They also established a modern legal system and civil service, which provided the basis for Singapore’s success as an independent nation. Similarly, in Australia and

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, Paul. “The British Empire: A Force for Good?”. *History Today*, vol. 63, no. 7, 2013, pp. 10-16.

<sup>12</sup> Blick, Andrew. *The Commonwealth and the English Reformation: Protestantism and the Politics of Religious Change in the Gloucester Vale, 1483-1560*. England: Boydell Press, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, Martin, and Gareth Curless. *Decolonization and Conflict: Colonial Comparisons and Legacies*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Canada, British colonialism led to the development of strong democratic institutions and a prosperous market economy.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, the British colonialism has also created a sustainable underdevelopment in most of the late colonies. Due to the former British severe exploitation of resources, depleted forests, minerals and other raw materials in a lot of areas are now difficult to replace. This situation makes domestic manufacturing sectors unsuccessful and create a trade imbalance justified by the lack of competitiveness.

### **Lasting Impacts of the Empire on Modern Society and Culture**

**Negative Lasting Impacts :** Gilroy has stated that “the British Empire has left a legacy of racism and discrimination [...]”.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination created by the empire are significant issues of modern societies. Despite multiple efforts to apologise, reconcile and get over the past, black and white people do not always hold good relationships due to the historical oppression, exploitation, dehumanisation and violence mostly exercised by the imperial power. Besides, poverty and inequality are nowadays recurrent problems, especially in many former colonies. In addition, almost all of them are still dealing with serious cultural identity matters because of the noticeable harm caused to their old traditional norms by the British colonisers who imposed theirs during the time of their rule.

**Positive Lasting Impacts :** Hitchens has written that, “While the legacy of colonialism is not without its flaws, it is important to acknowledge the positive contributions that the British Empire made to the world”.<sup>16</sup> So, from a much more positive perspective, the legacy of the empire is not the least. With the spread of British values and the English language during the age of the empire, globalisation and cultural brassage have largely been achieved today. The world is more interconnected than ever it had been in earlier centuries, with a spirit of cultural exchange and appreciation. In the same way, new educational systems in many parts of the world can be traced back to the British Empire. By helping the spread of innovations in domains like medicine, communication and engineering, it has also enabled the development of modern science and technology worldwide.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Britain, from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has controlled the greatest empire ever seen. It was initiated or unconsciously tested in the neighbour country of Ireland and then developed in the New World, that is the Americas. After the loss of its thirteen main colonies in America following the defeat of the British armies during the American War of Independence, the empire did not end. Instead, it has known its best days when, in addition to its remaining possessions, the imperial focus has consequently come to the east with the astonishing achievement of colonial ambitions in Asia, Oceania and Africa. Having effectively exercised its global hegemony for many decades, its decline eventually came only from WWI and WWII as well as the successive independence movements they gave birth to, among other results.

Still, during its lifetime the empire was maintained from London by a strong and well-organized system of governance implemented in their overseas possessions by the British rulers, either in a direct or an indirect way. They could also rely upon their main military power which was the Royal Navy to secure their dominating position within and outside the empire. Thanks to the British Industrial Revolution as well as the mercantilist behaviour as seen previously through events such as the Slave Trade and the Plunder of Bengal, abusive profits which were made comforted the already great British imperial supremacy. Besides, social life, from British citizens to native inhabitants of colonies, has ineluctably seen important changes during the era of the British Empire. Thus, the empire did not only do wrong, but both evil and good things that actually are still lasting today in politics, economy, society and culture all over the world. The Commonwealth of Nations with its strengths and weaknesses is probably the first living carrier of that legacy as it stands as the direct product of the British Empire. At a reduced scale, the late colonies, through their current states as well as the different problems they

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<sup>14</sup> Ferguson, Niall. *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Gilroy, Paul. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nations*. United States: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Hitchens, Christopher. *The Abolition of Britain: From Winston Churchill to Princess Diana*. London: Quartet Books, 1999.

are still dealing with also vehiculate the vestiges of the empire. However, no matter how positively or negatively the British Empire and its heritage may be seen, it has without any doubt deeply rooted modern realities.

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