

# 1 VICTORIAN ORIGINS

## After mercantilism

From the 1830s onwards, the Victorians gradually transformed their sprawling legacy of war and mercantilism into a world-system much of whose fabric survived into the late 1940s. Yet they did not do so to a conscious plan, nor under the influence of a master ideology. Victorian imperialists were drawn from different interests and classes. They were driven by motives that were at times contradictory. Rival visions of empire pulled them in different directions. Nor could they count on a source of irresistible power to carry them forward wherever they chose. British firepower and capital formed a limited stock for which, at any one time, there were competing demands. The scope for enlarging British influence or territory was not just a function of British wishes or needs. It also depended upon many factors and forces outside the control of – perhaps even unknown to – British interests and agents. Hence, much of their handiwork followed the law of unintended consequences. However clear-sighted the prophet, it would not have been easy to foresee the path followed by British expansion between 1830 and 1880. It would have been harder still to envisage the societies that it helped to create both overseas and at home in the British Isles. The imperial system that the Victorians made emerged by default not from design.

Once we concede that there was nothing inevitable about the extraordinary course of Victorian imperialism, we can begin to explore the gravitational field that governed British expansion: propelling it forward in some places; holding it back in others; bending and twisting its impact; raising or lowering its costs; imposing or concealing its contemporary meaning. The starting point must be the play of geopolitical

pressures. Victorian Britain was a powerful state, but it was not all-powerful, and much nonsense is talked of Victorian 'hegemony'. Even a minister as aggressive as Lord Palmerston, whose belligerent rhetoric is sometimes naively equated with his conduct of policy, was always acutely aware that British strength had its limits, especially on land. Victorian statesmen avoided confrontation with other strong powers whenever they could. Those who schemed for the extension of colonial territory looked first to the regions where little resistance was feared, or where the British already commanded the main geographical gateways. Secondly, it would be a mistake to imagine that the moves to expand Britain's spheres of rule, protection or semi-free trade were part of a programme or policy invented in Whitehall. Much more important was the pressure exerted by the old networks and lobbies that managed Britain's overseas interests and the new ones that sprang up to promote commercial, land-seeking, emigrant, humanitarian, missionary or scientific enterprise. The annexation of New Zealand, the first 'opium war' against China, and Britain's maritime presence on the west coast of Africa, reflected the strength of these lobbies, and their power to bend the 'official mind' to their will. Yet the fate of these schemes, and of many others besides, was also determined by a third force at work. The 'men on the spot', in the bridgeheads of trade, settlement, religion or rule, had to marshal the 'investments' (of money, men, credit or force) transmitted from Britain and use them to leverage added local resources. How successful they were in exploiting the trade, settling the land, tapping the revenue or enlisting the manpower of the regions around them decided how fast their bridgeheads would grow – and how much appeal they would have to those with influence at home. Indeed, building their 'connection' in London, winning over the press and public opinion, and cementing their ties with a favourable lobby, were a constant concern. The supreme practitioner of this 'bridgehead politics' after 1880 was to be Cecil Rhodes. But he had many precursors.

Left to itself, expansion of this kind was likely to throw up a whole series of 'sub-empires': offshoots of influence, occupation and rule wherever British interests could gain a favourable purchase. By the mid-nineteenth century, there were clusters of British merchants spread around the world from China to Peru, entrenched more or less in the overseas trade of formally sovereign states. There was a clutch of free-ports under British jurisdiction, where British merchants (and others) strove to gather the trade of the neighbouring region: Gibraltar,

Singapore and Hong Kong. There was a mass of (mostly) small settlements scattered across the enormous territories claimed or conquered as British ‘possessions’ and annexed to the Crown: ‘British’ North America (comprising the huge tracts ‘ruled’ by the Hudson’s Bay Company west of the Great Lakes as well as ‘the Canadas’ – modern Ontario and Quebec – and the four maritime provinces); Australia (perhaps one million immigrants along the ‘boomerang coast’ from Brisbane to Adelaide); New Zealand (a dozen small colonies mainly linked by the sea); and South Africa (where a handful of British in the Cape Colony and Natal lived with the more numerous ‘Dutch’ in a tense and often violent relation with the black communities within and beyond the colonial frontier). There were the old plantation colonies of the British West Indies, once the jewel in the imperial crown, but (with free trade in sugar and the loss of slave labour) now falling behind their economic competitors (Brazil and Cuba retained their slaves until late in the century). And there was India, still ruled by the Company (until 1858) with its huge ‘sepoy’ army, a great conquest state whose influence was exerted spasmodically on the arc of territories from Aden (annexed to Bombay in 1839) in the west to Singapore (ruled from Calcutta until 1867) in the east. In what sense, we might ask, was this disparate collection of ‘work camps in the wilderness’, mercantile agencies, mildewed plantations, treaty-ports and port-cities, coaling stations and bases, fractious semi-protectorates and one huge garrison state to be considered an ‘empire’? Yet, by the late nineteenth century, this ‘project of an empire’ (in Adam Smith’s phrase) had become a world-system. Its component parts assumed increasingly specialised roles. They fitted together in ways that maximised Britain’s power in the world. How had this happened?

Of the likeliest causes, perhaps three were decisive. The first was the greater integration permitted by technical advance and institutional change. The telegraph, steamship and railway speeded the flows of goods, information and people (as well as military force) between the imperial centre and its outlying parts. The rise of an international capital market in London, and its vast ‘information exchange’ (of newspapers, news agencies, specialised journals, commercial intelligence and promotional literature) increased the dependence of colonial or semi-colonial regions on this grand metropolis. When competing for markets, money and (in the case of settler countries) men, or if claiming the support and sympathy of the ‘imperial factor’ in their local affairs, they had to ‘sell’

themselves as net contributors to the larger 'British world', promising profits, goods or services not on offer elsewhere. The second influence at work was connected with this. The way that empire was imagined by the 1870s revealed the drawing of ever sharper distinctions between the economic trajectory, social development and political status to which different regions could aspire. J. R. Seeley's famous denial that the 'kith and kin' settlements of 'Greater Britain' (the phrase was coined by Charles Dilke in 1869<sup>1</sup>) were an empire at all was one symptom of this. Indian demands for an equal place in what Dadabhai Naoroji called the 'imperial firm',<sup>2</sup> and the angry rejection of a constitutional status below the internal self-government enjoyed by most settler societies, showed how quickly the implications of this were detected elsewhere. Thirdly, from the late 1860s onwards, the British began to think more systematically about the defence of their widely scattered possessions. One committee (in 1867) enquired into the prospects of organising a 'Force of Asiatic Troops for General Service in Suitable Climates' (to replace British garrisons).<sup>3</sup> In the late 1870s, the Royal Commission on Colonial Defence, spurred on by the fear of Russian advance, debated what contribution the colonies should make to their own protection.<sup>4</sup> As the novel conception of 'imperial defence' began to take shape, India's role as the 'imperial strategic reserve' in the world east of Suez became the dominant element in British plans for its future. The pressures of world politics, like those of the new 'world economy' (whose emergence may be dated from c.1870), pushed and prodded the mid-Victorians' forward rush into the late Victorians' world-system

### The geopolitics of expansion

Britain's global position after 1815 has often been seen as almost prodigally favourable in geopolitical terms: conferring free movement in almost any direction. It was certainly true that the era of world war between 1793 and 1815 had brought the British some remarkable winnings. They handed back Java and the other Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia as a dowry for the new Netherlands kingdom (modern Belgium and the Netherlands) that was meant to serve as the northern barrier to renewed French expansion. But they kept Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Mauritius and the Cape as a way of preventing the return of French sea-power to the Indian Ocean in any foreseeable future. In the Mediterranean,

with their hands on the Ionian islands, and above all on Malta with its Grand Harbour, they could keep their navy in the eastern part of the sea astride the main maritime route to the Straits and Egypt. In the North Atlantic, they already controlled (in Halifax and the British Caribbean) the bases from which to watch the American seaboard. The collapse of Spain, and the client status of Portugal, had now opened the South Atlantic coast to British maritime influence in Brazil and La Plata and (with the occupation of the Falkland Islands in 1833) gave them a guard-post that commanded Cape Horn. In themselves, the territories that the British acquired were not of great value and had small or poor populations. But their geostrategic meaning was huge. Their capture by Britain signalled the end of the mercantilist order that had partitioned Europe's seaborne trade with the Americas and Asia between the closed economic empires of Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, France and Britain. The age of 'free' trade was about to begin.

If the British had blasted open the path to unlimited commerce with the world beyond Europe, it also looked by the 1820s and 1830s as if the regimes at the far end of their long-distance sea-lanes had become more receptive, or at least more vulnerable, to their trade and diplomacy. In those decades, it seemed as if vast new worlds were now ready to be explored, exploited, colonised or converted. The successive opening up to travel and trade of Central and South America, the Niger, the South African interior, parts of the Middle East (especially Egypt), the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, New Zealand, the North Pacific and China promised a global revolution of which Britain was likely to be the main beneficiary. 'The situation of Great Britain', remarked a parliamentary committee in 1837, 'brings her beyond any other power into communication with the uncivilised nations of the earth.'<sup>5</sup> With command of the sea, a lion's share of inter-continental trade and a long lead in the use of industrial techniques, the British had the means (or so hindsight has often suggested) to make a universal empire along the lines they chose. With little to fear from any European rival, and the means to beat down any local resistance, they would become the hegemon, the invincible power.

A closer inspection makes for a more sober assessment. It was true that, since the naval triumph at Trafalgar, Britain's maritime strength made it hard for any other European state to attack its far-flung possessions by sea. The diplomacy of George Canning (British foreign

minister, 1822–7) was intended to exploit this advantage and restrict Britain's European neighbours to the affairs of their continent. Britain alone of the European powers would have position and influence in the world beyond: this was why it was so urgent to establish friendly relations with the newly independent states in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> But, if Canning had hoped that Britain's command of the New World would allow it to cast off the burdens of the Old, his successors (Canning died in 1827) learned a different lesson. His pupil, Lord Palmerston, faced a series of crises in Europe that threatened most of the gains of 1815. After 1830, the Belgian revolt tore in half the Netherlands kingdom – the guard-dog created against French domination of the Low Countries (and the invasion route to Britain). Spain and Portugal, saved from Napoleon by Wellington's army, seemed likely to fall under conservative monarchs who would look to Austria, Russia or even to France rather than to Britain. The Ottoman Empire seemed about to break up, with Egypt and Syria falling to Mehemet Ali (suspected by London to be a client of France) and the rest of the empire – including the Straits – remaining under the sultan, now reduced by misfortune to dependence on Russia. Britain lacked the means to act decisively, however vital its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. 'It was not in our power, already engaged in the affairs of Belgium and Portugal, to enter into a third business of this kind', the British prime minister told Palmerston in April 1833. 'We had no available force for such a [commitment] and I am quite sure that Parliament would not have granted us one.'<sup>7</sup> Instead, it was laborious diplomacy, the skilful exploitation of Russo-French rivalry and the mutual exhaustion of the local protagonists that brought Palmerston his triumph in 1840–1. Ottoman revival and Mehemet Ali's defeat restored the regional balance and secured the prime British interest in excluding any other great power from a dominant influence in the Eastern Mediterranean or on the land-bridge to India. In much the same way, Palmerston used the hostility of the 'Eastern Powers' (Prussia, Austria and Russia) towards France to entrench the independence and neutrality of the new Belgian state in the 1839 treaty.

The tense diplomacy of 1830–41 showed that British prestige and security, and the safety of their lines of communication with the outer world, depended upon an active diplomacy in Europe, not a passive enjoyment of Europe's internal divisions, let alone the assertion of London's irresistible will. In the world beyond Europe, as much

as in Europe itself, British leaders had to reckon with the ambitions of three large states as eager as they were to extend the sphere of their influence. France, Russia and the United States, Palmerston told the House of Commons in 1858, were ‘three great . . . powers . . . so far independent of naval warfare that even a naval reverse does not materially affect them’.<sup>8</sup> Each had the means to disrupt British influence or cut down its scope. Of the three, it was France that was the most potentially dangerous, although hopes of a liberal alliance – what Palmerston once called ‘a Western Confederacy of free states’<sup>9</sup> – periodically lulled British suspicion that Napoleonic ambitions still lingered in Paris. But French influence and interests in Belgium, Spain and Italy, the occupation of Algiers (in 1830) and the special connection with Egypt were a constant factor in British diplomacy. The reputation and size of France’s military machine, its volatile politics (with five regime changes between 1815 and 1851), its revolutionary tradition, and the influence derived from its enormous cultural prestige, made for uneasy and often irritable relations. ‘Nothing can be settled in Europe or the Levant without war’, the Duke of Wellington told Peel (then prime minister) in 1845, ‘unless by good understanding with France; nor can any question be settled in other parts of the world, excepting by the good understanding between France and this country.’<sup>10</sup> French public opinion was thought dangerously febrile: ‘a certain number of turbulent men, without profession, occupation or principles, idle and thoroughly demoralized, passing their time in reading newspapers and talking politics . . . give a fictitious character to public opinion’, said Palmerston, quoting Guizot.<sup>11</sup> The French government, said Peel, had ‘very little control over the popular will, and equally little over its servants, military, naval and diplomatic’.<sup>12</sup> That France was also a naval power, active in the Pacific, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, increased the danger of collision and a storm in the press. A French squadron blockaded the River Plate estuary in the late 1830s. In the second Western war against China in 1856–60, the French presence in East Asia was as large as the British. More serious was the risk that France would exploit Anglo-American tensions. Most frightening of all, at least for a time, was the fear that the application of steam power would allow France to reverse Britain’s historic naval advantage and open the way for a *Blitzkrieg* invasion.

Russia was not a colonial power in the maritime sense (except in Alaska, sold in 1867 to the United States). Its naval power outside

Europe was negligible. Russia had been the great counterweight to France in the struggle for Europe before 1815, to Britain's great benefit. By the 1820s, however, the renewal of Russia's southward expansion around the Black Sea, converging on the Straits, had become a major British obsession. The uncertain mood of the Ottoman government (often called 'the Porte' after the great gateway in Constantinople where its main offices were), the restless atmosphere of its European provinces and the open rebellion after 1830 of its over-mighty viceroy in Egypt, Mehemet Ali, all raised the prospect of a sudden implosion of Ottoman power. With the Tsar's armies a few forced marches away, he was likely to take a lion's share of the assets. With control of the Straits, the sympathy of Orthodox Greeks and Armenians (the main mercantile classes across the Near East), and a military grip on Eastern Anatolia, Russia would become the greatest power in the region, and the overlordship of Persia would follow in due course. 'I take Nicholas to be ambitious, bent upon great schemes, determined to make extensive additions to his dominions and, animated by the same hatred to England which was felt by Napoleon . . .' was Palmerston's verdict in 1835.<sup>13</sup> Whether Nicholas I and his ministers were really committed to the grand geopolitical designs attributed to them now seems unlikely. As an imperial power, Russia suffered from several obvious weaknesses, not least a backward economy, appalling communications, undigested minorities and a brittle and overstretched government.<sup>14</sup> Knowing these defects, the Russians were afraid of encirclement and economic attrition and tried to pre-empt them. But Palmerston was not alone in believing that Russia had entered a critical phase in its pursuit of world power. 'Sooner or later', he told a cabinet colleague, 'the Cossak and the Sepoy, the man from the Baltic and he from the British islands will meet in the centre of Asia. It should be our business to make sure that the meeting is as far off from our Indian possessions as may be convenient.'<sup>15</sup> He hoped to exploit Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (achieved with the help of French military power,<sup>16</sup> not just to drive it away from the Straits but to expel it from the Caucasus, its gateway to Asia and the scene of savage war against the Chechen population. But there and in East Asia, where the Aigun treaty brought them closer to North China in the late 1850s, the Russians were already too strong to be fenced in in this way.

The threat posed by Russia in the Middle East, and, by extension, in Central Asia, acted as a magnet on British grand strategy,



sucking the British towards risky forward commitments where their naval advantage was hard to deploy. In the western hemisphere they faced a quite different rival. The American republic was a white settler state, decentralised, populist and territorially avaricious on no less a scale than Russia or Britain. Its leaders were deeply suspicious of Britain and (in the South) fiercely resentful of the British attack on the slave trade and slavery. Britain 'is a great, opulent, and powerful nation', declared Henry Clay of Kentucky, 'but haughty, arrogant and supercilious. Not more separated from the rest of the world by the sea that girts her island than she is separated in feeling, sympathy or friendly consideration of their welfare.'<sup>17</sup> What the British called free trade 'is a mere revival of the British colonial system, forced upon us . . . during the existence of our colonial vassalage'.<sup>18</sup> American opinion regarded Britain's colonial presence on the North American continent as an archaic survival, futile and absurd: the 1812 war had been fought in part to expel it. But the Americans' restless expansion was bound to impinge on spheres claimed or controlled by British-backed interests. In Oregon and on the Maine–New Brunswick border, an agreement became urgent in the mid-1840s. The Americans also suspected that the British meant to frustrate the absorption of Texas and California, both of them wrenched from Mexican hands, and had designs on Cuba, whose great harbour at Havana guarded the exit from the Gulf of Mexico, and the maritime highway between the Mississippi valley and Europe. 'We must have Cuba. We can't do without Cuba, [and] above all we must not suffer its transfer to Great Britain', intoned James Buchanan, Secretary of State in the late 1840s.<sup>19</sup> And, as Clay had implied, many Americans resented their dependence upon British industrial goods and favoured a protectionist tariff. Henry C. Carey, the most influential economist in antebellum America, denounced free trade as a disastrous deflection of progress, diverting labour and funds away from local development into costly long-distance commerce.<sup>20</sup>

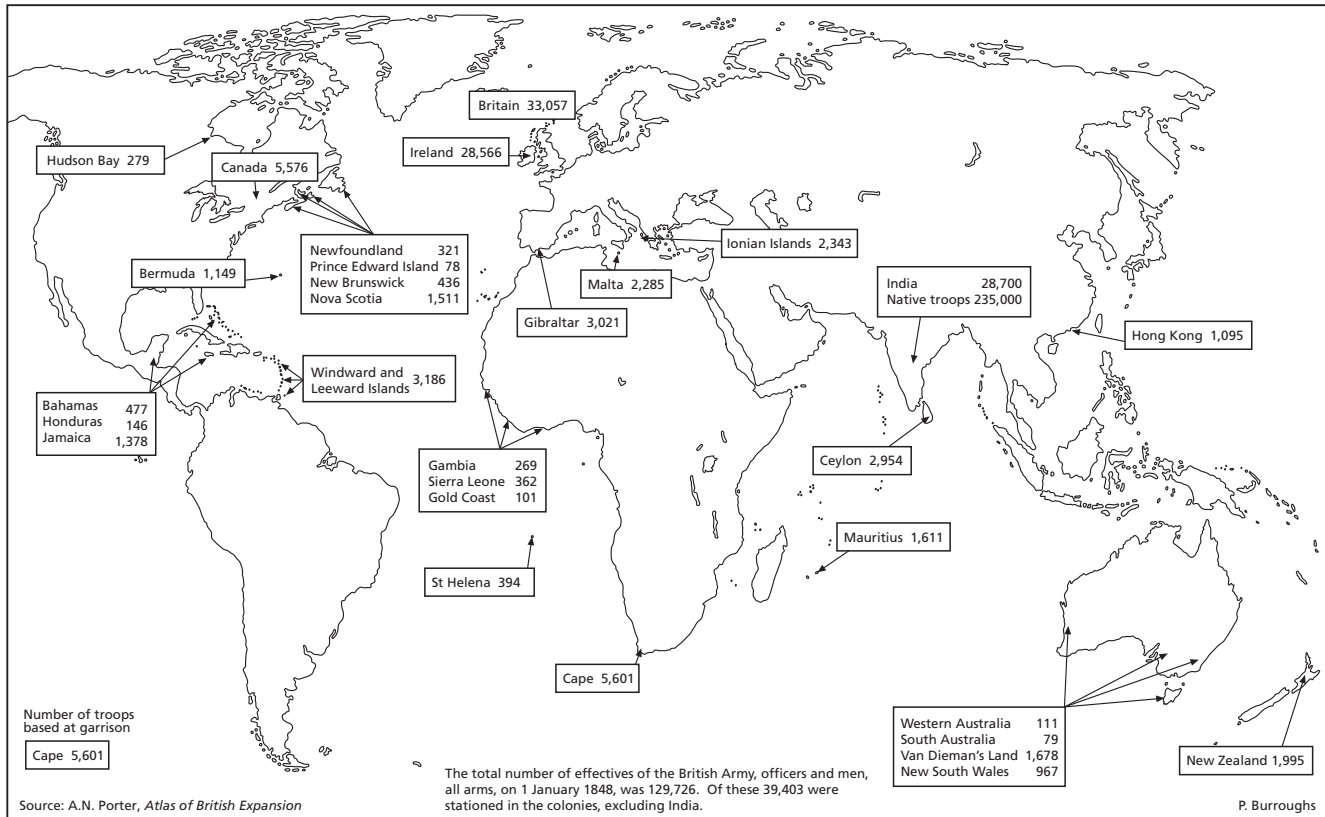
The British were not helpless against American pressure. Their main point of weakness was the threat of an invasion of Canada (modern Ontario and Quebec) which was weakly defended and almost beyond the reach of reinforcements once winter set in and the St Lawrence River was frozen. But they had a deterrent: the use of naval power to bombard American sea-ports and blockade American trade. In the disputed Oregon country, there were few American settlers, while the Hudson's Bay Company, with its forts and followers, had

a significant presence. Yet, although the threats flew and relations at times seemed close to a rupture, three powerful constraints discouraged British aggression. The first was the fear that an American conflict would encourage the other great powers – especially France – to join in against Britain: this was exactly what had happened in the Revolutionary War of 1775–83. Nervousness about France helped to push the British into settling the Oregon question to American satisfaction in 1846.<sup>21</sup> The second was the belief that (as Palmerston pointed out in 1858) British sea-power would be of only limited value if it came to a fight. The best the British could do in periods of tension was to reinforce their Canadian garrison to show they meant business.<sup>22</sup> The third was the sense that an American war, however successful, would be self-defeating. It was no coincidence that the emissary sent to resolve the boundary dispute over Maine was Lord Ashburton, a senior member of the Baring family and a banker with wide American contacts (he had helped to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase in 1803). Blockading American trade would inflict spectacular damage on the British economy. Thus the balance of strength in North America, while far from one-sided, decisively moulded the shape of British expansion. It set strict limits to the territorial growth of British North America and made its prosperity dependent in part on the economic goodwill of its great southern neighbour. Secondly, it ruled out any chance of coercing America into adopting free trade. The commercial and industrial power of the 'Old Northeast', centred on New York, was already a rival to that of Britain itself.<sup>23</sup> A high tariff barrier checked British exports and steadily increased the imbalance of trade in America's favour. And it was from New York, not London or Liverpool, that the trade of the 'Cotton Kingdom' (Lancashire's great partner) was managed.<sup>24</sup> In this richest of continents, the 'imperialism of free trade' had been stopped in its tracks.

Of course, there were places where the British had little to fear from the interference of France, Russia or the United States, although fewer perhaps than appeared at first sight. Palmerston ruled out the invasion of Persia (to stop it seizing Afghan Herat) in 1838 on the ground that it would only drive the shah closer to Russia. Instead, Afghanistan was to be 'saved' by an invasion from India – a costly calamity. Once the Russians were entrenched to the north of Manchuria, their reluctance to support the Anglo-French coercion of Peking eased the pressure on the Manchu court.<sup>25</sup> Even where and when

the British were free to apply their military power, they had to weigh up its costs against any possible gain. Their great asset was the Navy. Most of its powerful units had to be kept at home or in the Mediterranean to watch the French and the Russians. But, with nearly 200 ships, there were plenty to spare. A squadron blockaded the River Plate estuary between 1843 and 1846. Brazil was blockaded in the 1850s to enforce a ban on the slave trade.<sup>26</sup> Twenty gunboats on average patrolled the West African coast to stop the still-vigorous slave trade. The British assembled a fleet of forty ships (including numerous steamers) to force open China's trade in the first opium war.<sup>27</sup> Yet naval power had its limitations. It could bombard, blockade and police the sea-lanes. But bombardment was risky and required heavy-weight firepower. A blockade was as likely to damage British trade as to check errant rulers.<sup>28</sup> The slave trade patrol produced embarrassingly feeble results: in the four years after 1864, it caught a total of nine slaves. The most striking success was perhaps against China in 1840–2. This was not because naval force could be used directly against the Ch'ing government. But, by entering the Yangtse and seizing its junction with the Grand Canal, the British could paralyse China's internal commerce and bring the Emperor to terms.

Away from the sea, the spearhead of power, and its last resort, was the British regular army. Its strength had drifted upwards from 109,000 in 1829 to 140,000 by 1847.<sup>29</sup> Between 25,000 and 33,000 men were usually stationed in India (the number rose sharply during the Mutiny) as the praetorian guard of Company rule. A smaller number, perhaps 18,000, were at home in Britain. Much of the rest was scattered in packets across the colonies and Ireland (where around 18,000 men were normally kept<sup>30</sup>). This system depended, remarked an experienced general, on 'our naval superiority, and our means of conveying troops with great rapidity from one part of the world to another, which multiplies, as it were, the strength of our army'.<sup>31</sup> Even so, it was thinly stretched. Between 5,000 and 6,000 men defended Britain's North American provinces. In the Cape Colony, the 400-mile frontier, where raiding and reprisal were constant between whites and blacks, was guarded by a single battalion of infantry too encumbered with equipment to chase cross-border intruders.<sup>32</sup> Its reinforcement was 600 miles away in Cape Town and the whites in the region depended instead on their local commandos (volunteer bands of notorious ferocity) for defence and revenge. Twelve hundred men sent to New Zealand



Map 1 Distribution of British troops, 1848

in 1845 fought a pitched battle with Maori at Ruapekapeka in the North Island, but lacked the strength to compel their acceptance of British authority.<sup>33</sup> In effect, the army was a collection of garrisons whose main purpose was to protect the colonies from attack by an imperial rival or a revolt from within (as in Ireland, French Canada and British-ruled India). Fifty thousand men were scraped together in 1854 for the Anglo-French assault on Sebastopol, but, with that inglorious exception, the offensive power of the British on land was really pivoted on India, where the Company maintained an enormous army (until after the Mutiny of 1857) of some 200,000 men. The British regiments there could be combined with sepoy battalions to form a respectable force. Of the ten thousand men sent to China in 1842, the larger part were Indians. In the second China war (just after the Mutiny), they made up just under half of the British contingent. It was from India that expeditions could also be mounted into Persia, Afghanistan, Burma and Abyssinia. It was India that made the British a military and not just a naval power – but a military power whose active sphere was almost entirely confined to the world south and east of Suez.

In the 1830s and 1840s, we can see that a certain geopolitical ‘logic’ was imposing a shape on Britain’s place in the world. In the official view from London, Europe bulked largest and posed the most danger. No set of ministers was likely to forget the lesson of what was still called the ‘Great War’. Their first priority was to preserve the chief gain of 1815 – and prevent the rise of a European hegemon. For all his bluster, Palmerston stood on the defensive in Europe, watching apprehensively over the Low Countries, Portugal, Spain and the Eastern Mediterranean. In North America, too, the British watchword was caution, lest the populist anarchy of American politics unleash an invasion which they would have to repel – perhaps at a difficult moment. Naval power was deployed on the South American coast in the 1840s and 1850s. But its utility in extending British influence there was open to question. The blockade of Brazil forced a stop on the slave trade but failed to induce a more liberal tariff.<sup>34</sup> There was little enthusiasm for using military power to advance the colonial frontier. When the cost of the South African garrison shot up to over £1 million in the late 1840s (as a result of its frontier wars), London quickly abandoned the highveld interior to the Boer republics. When Whitehall gave way to the urgent request from New Zealand in the mid-1860s, and sent 10,000 men to crush Maori resistance, it did so expecting the cost to be borne

by the settler government in Wellington and was enraged when it was not.<sup>35</sup> Only in the sphere where Indian power (both naval and military since the Persian Gulf was patrolled by the Bombay Marine and it was Company steamers that were sent to China in 1842) was available to them could British governments take the lead in advancing British influence. Even there (as we have seen) the limits of action were narrow. Almost everywhere else, the task of building an empire, whether formal or not, fell to private interests at home and to the 'men on the spot'.

### **Making Empire at home: domestic sources of British expansion**

#### **Commerce**

'The great object of the Government in every quarter of the world was to extend the commerce of the country', Palmerston told Parliament in 1839.<sup>36</sup> This was not a new doctrine. The close inter-relation between power and profit was proverbial wisdom. Few public men would have denied the connection between overseas trade and Britain's strength as a state. The contribution of trade to taxable wealth, to Britain's ability to subsidise allies in wartime, and to the vital reserve of skilled naval manpower, was well understood. Without overseas trade, empire was redundant, a futile extravagance. Trade was the source of most colonies' revenue and helped to defray the cost of their garrisons. It could also be seen as a great arm of influence. 'Not a bale of merchandise leaves our shores', Richard Cobden declared in 1836, 'but it bears the seeds of intelligence and fruitful thought to the members of some less enlightened community. . . . [O]ur steamboats and our miraculous railways are the advertisements and vouchers of our enlightened institutions.'<sup>37</sup> In the 1830s and 1840s, the expansion of overseas trade took on a new urgency. New markets were needed for the swiftly rising production of textiles and ironware, to avert depression, unemployment and strife in industrial districts. Britain's domestic tranquillity required the growth of its trade.

The leading role in promoting the expansion of trade was played not by governments but by merchant houses, especially those based in the largest ports: London, Liverpool and Glasgow. The sum of their efforts might be likened to creating a vast commercial republic, embracing Britain's empire but much else beyond. Its scale can be seen in the statistics for exports whose nominal value had risen from

some £38 million in 1830 to £60 million in 1845 and £122 million by 1857. They were matched by the fourfold increase between 1834 and 1860 in the tonnage of shipping that used British ports.<sup>38</sup> From its old concentration in the Atlantic basin, British mercantile enterprise had spread round the world by the mid-nineteenth century. In the late 1840s, a census revealed around 1,500 British ‘houses’ abroad, nearly 1,000 outside the European mainland, with 41 in Buenos Aires alone.<sup>39</sup> The most notable feature of this commercial expansion, apart from the overall increase in volume, was the shift towards markets in Asia and the Near East (up from 11 per cent of exports in 1825 to nearly 26 per cent in 1860) and in Africa and Australasia (up from 2 per cent to over 11 per cent).

The speed with which British merchants moved out to search for new business, their success in constructing new commercial connections and their dominant position in long-distance trade made Britain *the* great economic power of the nineteenth-century world. This great expansionist movement arose from the junction of favourable forces already apparent by the mid-1830s. British merchants were the immediate gainers from the opening of the trade of Brazil and Spanish America during the Napoleonic War: indeed, wartime Brazil had been virtually a British protectorate. The release of British trade with India (1813), the Near East (1825) and China (1833) from the regime of chartered monopolies encouraged a flood of new enterprise. The rapid development of the American economy after 1815 was another huge benefit. With its favoured position at a maritime crossroads (where the shortest transatlantic route crossed the seaway linking the north and south of Europe), Britain became the main entrepot for the New World’s trade with the Old – just as it was for the seaborne trade between Europe and Asia until the cutting of the Suez Canal in 1869. By 1815, London had replaced Amsterdam as the financial centre of Europe, partly because of the wartime blockade of the European mainland, partly because it had been at the centre of a Europe-wide web of war loans and subsidies. The supply of long credit on easy terms from London was the key to business with regions where the local financing of long-distance trade was underdeveloped or lacking. Above all, by the 1830s, with the arrival of power-weaving, the British could undercut competition across the whole range of cotton manufactures (the most widely traded commodity), and break into new markets with products as much as two hundred times cheaper than the local supply.

The main agent of commerce was the commission merchant, usually in partnership. He took goods on consignment from manufacturers at home and a share of the sale price when a buyer was found. In the 1830s and 1840s, there were powerful incentives to search hard for new outlets. Although Britain's industrial output was growing, nearby markets in Europe were either closed altogether against foreign industrial goods, restricted by tariffs or comparatively stagnant. Some manufacturers gave merchants a free hand to sell at cost price or less – a form of dumping.<sup>40</sup> Armed with cheap credit, equipped with cheap goods, the merchants searched for customers wherever opportunity offered. Of course, the conditions they found were bound to vary enormously, and so did their methods. Henry Francis Fynn, a ship's supercargo, went ashore at Delagoa Bay in 1822 and paddled up-river, looking for ivory to exchange with his trinkets and bolts of cloth.<sup>41</sup> As late as the 1880s, some trade in West Africa was still conducted from ships sailing along the coast, waiting for locals to venture out through the surf.<sup>42</sup> Few British traders ventured far inland or were allowed to do so by African middlemen resentful of interlopers. Much of Britain's trade with the United States was soon in the hands of American merchants: the role of the British was to supply the finance, to become 'merchant bankers'.<sup>43</sup> In Latin America, British merchants sometimes went into partnership with local Creole merchants to widen their contacts and enlist local finance. In Brazil, British merchants quickly established a dominant position in the sugar and coffee trades, Brazil's principal exports.<sup>44</sup> In Canada, the fusion of the Hudson's Bay Company and its Montreal rival, the North West Company, in 1821 built a powerful nexus of Anglo-Canadian businessmen including Edward 'Bear' Ellice (Palmerston's *bête noire*), Andrew Colville, Sir George Simpson, Alexander Wedderburn (brother-in-law of the Earl of Selkirk), Curtis Lampson (a key figure in the laying of the Atlantic cable and grandfather of the proconsul Miles Lampson, Lord Killearn) and Alexander Matheson, nephew of the co-founder of Jardine Matheson, a Bank of England director, and the biggest fish in the China trade. In India, British merchants were usually partners in one of the 'agency houses' to be found in Calcutta and Madras, whose original purpose had been to remit home the earnings (one might almost say 'winnings') of the East India Company's 'servants'. Agency houses dealt with imports and exports but also acted as bankers to Europeans working in India and managed plantations and processing plants (in jute or indigo) for their European



owners. Agency houses spread from India into Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia in the first half of the century. When direct British trade with China (and the right to buy tea) ceased to be an East India Company monopoly after 1833, British houses (with Jardine Matheson in the van) were quickly set up there.<sup>45</sup>

This furious commercial activity had created by mid-century a worldwide network of international business centred on Liverpool, Glasgow and, above all, London. The extension of trade brought with it shipping, insurance and banking, managed and financed by allied mercantile interests or by the merchants themselves. It built up a huge fund of ‘commercial intelligence’ – market information – and widened the circuits along which it travelled: business letters, reports, local chambers of commerce and globe-trotting businessmen. Since every market was different, there was no single objective and no unified lobby. The main merchant demands were protection from warfare or pirates – largely secured by Britain’s command of the seas outside Europe; ‘free’ trade – meaning the right to trade in overseas markets on the same terms as locals; and ‘improvements’ – usually investment in canals, roads or railways. British exporters complained bitterly at the miserly spending of the East India Company’s government on railways and roads, which they blamed for the shortage of return cargoes from India and the slow growth of their trade. The ‘Canadian’ interest grasped soon enough that Montreal’s future depended on railways, if it was to survive the end of imperial preference in the late 1840s.<sup>46</sup>

The British government’s role in building the ‘commercial republic’ was not insignificant, but it was bound to be limited. As Palmerston claimed, it was keen to advance the sphere of free trade abroad. Through treaties of commerce, it sought to protect British merchants and their property from unfair or discriminatory treatment, and to obtain ‘most favoured nation’ status – the right for British goods to enter on terms at least as good as those enjoyed by the ‘most favoured’ foreign state. The treaty system and Britain’s naval presence (the world’s seas were divided into eight overseas ‘stations’) gave British merchants unprecedented freedom to trade, but no guarantee of success. ‘Free trade imperialism’, in the sense of intervention by London, largely functioned in this indirect mode. For five years in mid-century when a detailed count was kept, gunboats were sent to protect commercial interests *outside* the Empire in a bare handful of cases, usually against the threat of violent disorder.<sup>47</sup> But there were three important exceptions to this

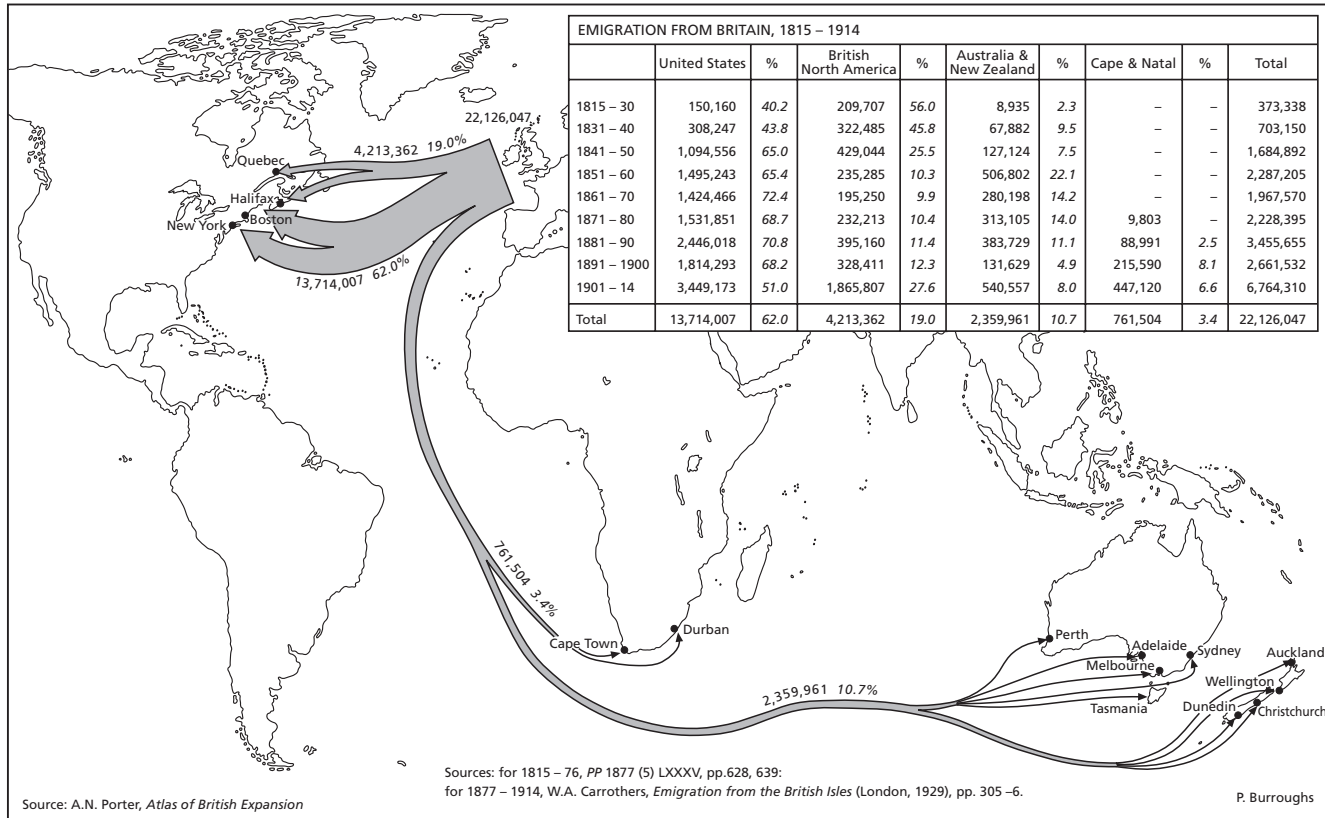
hands-off policy. First, government subsidy for the carriage of mail encouraged the rapid expansion of scheduled steamship services across the Atlantic, to South America and to India and the Far East. Secondly, as we have noticed already, the Navy maintained a flotilla of some twenty gunboats on the coast of West Africa. Palmerston declaimed on the need to use force there in the interests of trade. 'Cudgels & Sabres & Carbines are necessary to keep quiet the ill-disposed People whose violence would render Trade insecure', ran a vehement minute.<sup>48</sup> But of course the targets of Palmerston's cudgel were the slave traders who tried to drive out the 'legitimate' trade that threatened their own. The gunboats were meant to keep them at bay until the trade in palm oil and other commodities was strong enough to destroy them. Here was a case where commerce sub-served the great moral obsession of Victorian Britain. Thirdly, there was China.

China was much the most striking case where military power was used in the interests of trade. Under heavy pressure from the merchant lobby, and fearing a huge claim to compensate them for the opium that the Chinese had seized, London despatched an expeditionary force in 1840 to demand reparations and win commercial concessions. The treaty of Nanking in 1842 opened half a dozen 'treaty-ports' where British merchants were exempt from Chinese jurisdiction, laid down a maximum tariff that the Chinese could levy on imports and transferred the huge harbour at Hong Kong (then still a village) to the British. After the second opium war (1856–60), the list of ports was extended and the Chinese interior opened to foreign travel. To uphold these rights, the British maintained a fleet of between thirty and forty ships, most of them gunboats, to police the coasts and rivers against pirates, anti-foreign disturbances and uncooperative officials.<sup>49</sup> The commitment seems surprising since the volume of trade remained comparatively modest even late in the century – far below the levels of Britain's India trade. The answer may lie in a curious set of coincidences. Intervention took place at a moment of intense concern about British markets abroad and when the commercial promise of China was wildly inflated (a recurrent phenomenon for more than a century). 'The nation who, but for the existence of certain restrictions on trade, would probably buy the greatest amount of English manufactured goods are . . . the Chinese', claimed Edward Gibbon Wakefield in 1834.<sup>50</sup> Commercial access to China, as it turned out, could only be gained through the consular enclaves and extraterritorial rights to which Peking agreed, both of them subject to

constant local attrition. It was India that provided the available means to secure British claims, and India that had a big interest in doing so. British trade in China was largely an outgrowth of the India trade: 'East India' merchants sent Indian opium and cotton to China to buy tea and silk. But the opium itself was a government monopoly, and the revenue from it made up nearly one-fifth of the Indian government's income. The amount exported to China rose astronomically in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>51</sup> Here, profit and power were inextricably linked. Nor did it seem that the periodic coercion of China would be costly or difficult. When Lord Elgin was sent east in 1857 to demand a new treaty after the breakdown of relations at Canton, he was initially given a mere handful of troops and told to rely upon naval action (to cut the river above Canton and block the Grand Canal) to force Peking to terms. 'It is not the intention of Her Majesty's Government to undertake any land operations in the interior of the country', London grandly declared.<sup>52</sup>

### Migrants and missions

The search for new markets in the Outer World was the most obvious expression of British expansion. But it was allied to two others. The first was migration. After 1830, the number of migrants from Britain rose steadily: 1832 was the first year in which more than 100,000 departed for destinations beyond Europe.<sup>53</sup> The United States was much the most popular choice, especially for the huge outflow of Irish after the Famine. But British North America, Australia and (after 1840) New Zealand also attracted a significant number. Perhaps the commonest method was through 'chain migration' when an 'advance party' created the links (and perhaps remitted the means) to bring over friends and family.<sup>54</sup> But migration was also a business, and perhaps even a 'craze'. Migration societies spread propaganda and fired enthusiasm.<sup>55</sup> The 'idea' of migration as a road to self-betterment became increasingly popular. There were also the land companies that sprang up in the 1820s and 1830s, to channel this movement and turn it into a profit. Their aim was to buy land (cheaply) from its indigenous owners (or a colonial government) and resell it (dearly) to settlers whom they recruited in Britain. The Swan River Settlement (in which Robert Peel's brother had an interest), the Australian Agricultural Company, the Van Diemen's Land Company, the Western Australian Company, the Canada Company and the British American Land Company were all of this type. The interest in such ventures was fuelled in part by social



Map 2 Migration from the British Isles, 1815-1914

anxiety. ‘Colonisation’ was a way of relieving economic distress, directly by removing unneeded labour, indirectly (as Edward Gibbon Wakefield argued) by creating new consumers abroad. It was no coincidence that some of the most ardent free traders (like Sir William Molesworth) were also drawn into the colonisation business. The South Australian Association was a highly successful lobby that won government support for a new settlement colony to which more than 10,000 migrants were sent in its first few years. Even more daring was Wakefield’s New Zealand Association (1837), which successfully forced the British government’s hand into annexing the islands.<sup>56</sup> Its patrons included some of the greatest and best, among them Lord Durham, cabinet minister, ambassador and the special commissioner into the Canadian rebellions of 1837–8. It promised, among other things, to save ‘the native inhabitants’ from the evils inflicted by the disreputable Europeans already in the country.<sup>57</sup> Not all were convinced. ‘This beautiful compound of the mercantile and the merciful’, sneered *The Times*, ‘will occasion a brisk demand for religious tracts and ball-cartridges.’<sup>58</sup>

The colonisation movement, unofficial and private as well as organised and official (the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission was set up in 1840 mainly to subsidise migration to Australia from colonial land revenues), advanced in parallel with the great expansion of trade. It threw out dozens of settlements, often small and isolated, whose strongest links were with their parent communities in the British Isles, the source of their manpower, exiguous capital and religious identity. Tiny outposts, like those of the Scots on Cape Breton, lonely New Plymouth in New Zealand’s North Island,<sup>59</sup> the even more lonely Kaipara,<sup>60</sup> as well as the larger and better known colonies in Upper Canada, New South Wales, Victoria, Otago and Canterbury, were all part of a web of human connections to which almost every part of the British Isles was linked. If commercial expansion helped breed a demand for ‘free’ trade, demographic expansion evoked a cry for ‘free’ land. The right of the British to settle abroad became as much part of their ‘birthright’ as the right to trade without let or hindrance. In the twenty-one years after 1850, an annual average of more than 200,000 people migrated abroad.<sup>61</sup> By that time, the idea of overseas settlement as amounting almost to a providential duty was becoming deeply entrenched. ‘The great object and purpose of England in colonising was the multiplication of her race’, declaimed W. E. Gladstone in

1852. 'Whatever course of legislation tended most to the rapid expansion of population and power, in [Britain's] colonies, necessarily tended to enhance the reflected benefits that she was to derive from their foundation.'<sup>62</sup> There was a wide consensus in Britain, claimed Edward Cardwell thirteen years later, about 'the great advantage of having these free, industrious and enterprising communities sharing their own blood, their own language, and their own laws, settled over the whole world'.<sup>63</sup>

Migrant and mercantile interests could mobilise a wide if fragmented constituency to support the extension of British influence. So, for different reasons, could missionary societies. The most important of these were the Baptist Missionary Society, founded in 1792, the inter-denominational London Missionary Society (1795), the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society (1799), the British Foreign and Bible Society (1804) and the Wesleyan Missionary Society (1813). Launched on a wave of evangelical enthusiasm, the societies were carried by the surge of popular religiosity and the patriotic feeling of wartime. It was 'artisans, petty shopkeepers and labourers who made up the bulk of the missionary workforce'.<sup>64</sup> 'Is it presumptuous', asked the annual report of the Church Missionary Society in 1812, 'to indulge the humble and pious hope that to Great Britain may be entrusted the high commission of making known the name of Jesus to the whole world?'<sup>65</sup> In 1813, in a signal victory, the societies forced the East India Company to fund a church establishment and admit missionaries freely to its territories on the sub-continent. By 1821, the societies had a collective income of over £250,000 a year.<sup>66</sup> By 1824, the Church Missionary Society alone had sent abroad more than 100 missionaries.<sup>67</sup> By 1848, it had over 100 stations and had recruited some 350 missionaries.<sup>68</sup>

Between the 1820s and the 1840s, the missionary frontier was as dynamic as the mercantile. In South Africa, a survey between 1838 and 1840 counted eighty-five stations, most of them run by the London Missionary Society or the Wesleyans.<sup>69</sup> In New Zealand, where Samuel Marsden had arrived in 1814, well before annexation in 1840, more than sixty stations were active by the 1840s.<sup>70</sup> In the same decade, missionary enterprise in West Africa was carried along the coast from its old bridgehead in Sierra Leone to Yorubaland in modern Nigeria, where a station was founded at Abeokuta, and into the Niger delta at Calabar.<sup>71</sup> Johan Krapf landed at Zanzibar in January 1844 to open the campaign for souls in East Africa. By that time, the greatest prize

of all seemed within reach. The first resident Protestant missionary in China had been Robert Morison, who was sent to Canton in 1807 by the London Missionary Society.<sup>72</sup> But the real missionary-king of the China coast was the anglicised German Karl (Charles) Gutzlaff. Gutzlaff had gone first to the Dutch East Indies where he made contact with Chinese traders whose junks still carried much of the commerce of Southeast Asia. In 1831, he made the hazardous journey up the China coast (then forbidden to European travellers) as far north as Tientsin, the port for Peking, and ingratiated himself with the local authorities by his medical skills. By the time he returned to Macao (to which European traders were required to withdraw at the end of the trading season in Canton), he had acquired a wider knowledge of contemporary China and Chinese than any other Westerner, and a brimming faith in the scope for conversion. His *Journal of Three Voyages along the Coast of China* (1834) was a sensation. A Gutzlaff Association was formed. It was Gutzlaff's ingenious formula of the medical missionary, and the glamour of bringing China to Christ that inspired the young David Livingstone: only the opium war and the temporary cessation of missionaries to China diverted him to Africa in 1841. But, with the treaty of Nanking in 1842, a new era had opened for missionaries as well as merchants: the following year, the Protestant mission organisations in East Asia met in Hong Kong to share the field between them.<sup>73</sup> The total of Chinese converts was tiny (six in 1842, 350 ten years later<sup>74</sup>); enthusiasm at home was to flag before it revived; and the missionary effort (as much American as British, Catholic as well as Protestant) was battered by the storms that swept over South and Central China in the 1850s. But it was missionary enterprise as much as commercial that defined the British presence in the Ch'ing empire.

By the later 1840s, the missionary societies had mapped out a vast field of operations. 'Contrast . . . the present openness of the whole world to missionary enterprise', exulted the Church Missionary Society, recalling the era when India had been barred, New Zealand 'shunned' and the Caribbean blacks 'crushed'.<sup>75</sup> At home they could draw on a reservoir of popular sympathy organised through the evangelical societies into a private army of millions, 'ready', said a correspondent in *Blackwood's* in 1824, 'to take the field at a moment's notice'.<sup>76</sup> The *Missionary Register*, one of several missionary organs, had over 120,000 subscribers in 1826.<sup>77</sup> Exeter Hall was opened in 1831 for the annual meeting of the societies, whose attendance ran into the

thousands. Gentlemanly evangelicals were found in cabinet and Parliament. Missionary publications – autobiography, propaganda and travel (like John Phillip's *Researches in South Africa*, 1828) – shaped public knowledge of remote places. No one did more to arouse public enthusiasm than David Livingstone (1813–73), the missionary-explorer of South Central Africa. Livingstone's ardent evangelism, his epic crossing of Africa (1852–6), and his passionate attack on the Arab and Portuguese slave trades, evoked intense public sympathy. Livingstone's own writings, full of danger and hope, and his keen sense of publicity, reinforced the effect. By the late 1850s, he was a great public figure. His lectures at Oxford and Cambridge led to the founding of a new Anglican mission, the Universities Mission to Central Africa. His vehement campaign against the East African slave trade forced the government in London to fund a 'Zambezi expedition' to open the river to 'legitimate' trade. Livingstone himself was received by the Queen. At a great farewell banquet of over 300 guests in February 1858, he lectured his hosts (some of the great men of the day) on their self-evident duty. 'Should we be able', he told them, 'to open a communication advantageous to ourselves with the natives of the interior of Africa, it would be our great duty to confer upon them the great benefits of Christianity which have been bestowed upon ourselves' – a demand greeted with cheers.<sup>78</sup> 'Were your lordship in power', he wrote to Lord Palmerston the following year, 'I would strongly urge free trade to be secured on the Zambezi.'<sup>79</sup>

Of course, missionary enterprise could be an awkward partner with other forms of British enterprise. Missionaries often depended on traders – Gutzlaff had sailed on ships selling opium. In New Zealand, they sold muskets and speculated in land. Sometimes, they took public office or acted as intermediaries between colonial rule and indigenous peoples. But, in other ways, their 'version' of empire conflicted with the interests of merchants, settlers and officialdom, and their networks of information and lobbying competed with those of their secular rivals for public support. For more than most outsiders, missionaries depended upon the goodwill of their hosts. They needed local sponsorship, better still an invitation from authority.<sup>80</sup> Missionary strategy envisaged not the indefinite tutelage of subject peoples but the rapid creation of a native clergy. In West Africa, the most dynamic missionary leaders were the part-African Thomas Freeman and the Yoruba Samuel Crowther.<sup>81</sup> Christian conversion worked best where



missionaries helped to rebuild local communities fragmented by ethnic conflict or the fall-out from European expansion. ‘The great bane of Africa’, wrote the South African missionary statesman, Dr John Phillip, ‘is the minute fractions into which its tribes have been broken up by the Slave Trade; we have here materials for a viable building but nothing can be done towards it till the fragments are joined together. The Gospel is the only instrument by which this means can be accomplished.’<sup>82</sup>

British protection should be extended over neighbouring peoples (he had the Xhosa in mind), but they should become British subjects and their lands secured against settler incursion. Britain’s true interest lay in fringing its borders with independent black nations sharing a common Christian civilisation.<sup>83</sup> Far from conceding that the missions depended on empire, Phillip insisted that the reverse was the case. Missionaries, he urged, ‘are . . . extending British interests, British influence and the British empire . . . [E]very genuine convert . . . made to the Christian religion becomes the ally and friend of the colonial government.’<sup>84</sup> To much missionary opinion, the greatest obstacle to conversion was the contamination of their flock by the vices and desires of itinerant traders and land-hungry settlers. ‘The White Man’s intercourse has demoralised them, his traffic has defrauded them, his alliances have betrayed them, and his wars have destroyed them’, the Aborigine Protection Society told Lord Glenelg in 1838. ‘They have thus lost the virtues of the savage without acquiring those of the Christian.’<sup>85</sup> ‘The great intercourse with the Shipping’, raged the New Zealand missionary Henry Williams in 1831, ‘is the curse of the land.’<sup>86</sup> For many missionaries, then and later, spiritual salvation could only be assured by physical segregation.

Mercantile, migrant and missionary interests in mid-Victorian Britain were eager to enlarge the commercial, colonised and religious spheres where British enterprise was dominant and British influence unchallenged. Their restlessness, aggression, economic dynamism and spiritual ‘energy’ were given force and direction by the peculiar conjuncture that formed early and mid-Victorian society. This was, first of all, a society in the throes of unprecedented mobility, stimulated in part by the differential effects of economic change (driving people off the land, expanding towns and cities) and accentuated by the new means of travel. By 1870, every sizeable town in Britain had a railway station, and the network itself (at 13,000 miles) was the densest in Europe. Industrialism had created the means as well as the motive for

migration – within Britain, beyond Britain – on a scale undreamt of before the 1830s. It transformed the geographical space within which people in the British Isles could imagine their lives. Secondly, while Britain had long been a 'polite and commercial' society, the growth of new industries alongside old trading connections, the rapid integration of the national economy (partly through railways), and the appearance of new urban societies where social bonds and identities were being remade, created a more intensely competitive and commercialised society, or perhaps more accurately one where a competitive and commercial ethos was ever more widely diffused. We should not listen too much to the lamentations of contemporaries regretting the end of deference (or migrants in exile bemoaning the rise and rise of conspicuous consumption<sup>87</sup>), but the census records give some indirect indication of how quickly commerce was expanding as an occupation. In 1851, there were just under 44,000 'commercial clerks'; twenty years later, the number had more than doubled (as had the number of merchant seamen). Thirdly, the velocity with which information and ideas could circulate, as well as the volume that the 'information circuits' could carry, was also increasing dramatically. Letters and packets that were transported by steam and at hugely reduced cost were part of the story and so was the telegraph. Newspapers and 'monthlies' extended their reach. By 1870, the leading London dailies sold together some 400,000 copies, and dailies were printed in forty-three provincial towns. The number of books published rose by 400 per cent between 1840 and 1870.<sup>88</sup> Societies sprang up to disseminate knowledge (like the Royal Geographical Society, founded in 1830), drawing their subscribers in part from those with utilitarian, not to say mercenary, objects in mind. The scope for publicity, advertisement and pressure-group politics were all enlarged with this industrial production of knowledge. Lastly, economic and social change, far from making Victorian Britain a more homogeneous society, reinforced its pluralism, empowered its interest groups and intensified the sense of spiritual and cultural as well as social struggle. The arena of struggle was, at least partly, to be found abroad. The search for escape from social oppression and hardship, the projects of those who envisaged ideal societies in distant 'new Britains', the hopes of those who sought spiritual uplift by saving the heathen, and the enthusiasms of those pursuing humanitarian goals, scientific knowledge or private adventure supplied much of the energy for 'British expansion'.

This is not to argue that Victorian society was dynamic enough by itself to carve out a world empire. It did not have to be. The new social energy that it generated was injected into the husk of an older empire and supercharged the commercial networks that had already grown up in the Atlantic basin. Both left their mark. Victorian imperialism was thus a curious fusion of mercantilist ambitions and free trade assumptions, ‘nabob’ morality and Evangelical high-thinking, an eighteenth-century ‘estate’ and nineteenth-century ‘improvements’. There is a second limitation on what Victorian society could achieve by itself. It projected its influence all over the world and with particular force into those regions where it met less resistance from an organised state, an existing ‘high culture’ or a developed economy. But the scale and scope of British world power was bound to depend not only on the manpower, money and produce that flowed out from Britain, but also on the extent to which they could leverage more local resources. It was at the ‘bridgehead’ that the question was settled: how and in what form the agents of British expansion could command a hinterland, build a new state and harness its wealth to the imperial project.

### **Bridgeheads of empire**

The most visible evidence of Britain’s power in the world by the mid-nineteenth century was the extraordinary scale of its territorial possessions in North America, the South Pacific, Southern Africa and India. At opposite ends of the globe lay two large bundles of settlement colonies: six in North America (Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, ‘Canada’ – modern Ontario and Quebec – and British Columbia) and seven in Australasia (New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and New Zealand). In both these vast regions, it was Britain’s naval and military power that was the main safeguard against foreign invasion – American, French or, less plausibly, Russian (although fear of Russian attack reached fever pitch in Melbourne during the Crimean War). But neither British strength nor wealth was the primary cause of their rapid development as semi-autonomous colonial states with standards of living as high if not higher than the ‘mother-country’ at home.

The key role had been played by their colonial elites, even before they had wrested full internal self-government from the Colonial Office

in London. The North American colonies had had a headstart. Halifax (founded 1749) and Montreal (captured 1760) had attracted merchants from the Thirteen Colonies to the south. After 1783, they were reinforced by loyalist exiles who brought mercantile knowledge as well as artisan skills and a hunger for land. New Brunswick developed quickly as a producer of timber, the main source of wealth, employment and population growth. The leading lumber firm in Saint John, that also built ships and traded with the British West Indies, was founded by refugees from New York.<sup>89</sup> Samuel Cunard, founder of the shipping line and a dominant figure in Nova Scotia's economy by the 1830s, was the son of a Pennsylvania loyalist whose burgeoning business empire he inherited. The commercial success of British North America's port-cities attracted merchants from Britain. Hugh Allan arrived in Montreal from Glasgow in the 1820s as the junior partner in the family ship-owning business. He quickly built up a substantial share in Montreal's export trade (the main staple was timber) and secured the mail contract for Liverpool. His business empire embraced railways and telegraphs as well as shipping, banking, insurance and even manufacturing.<sup>90</sup> Allan was one of a group of Montreal entrepreneurs whose interests were continental in scale. Their burning ambition was to conscript British capital for the building of railways that would make Montreal into a commercial metropolis to rival New York.<sup>91</sup> Their achievement lay in harnessing their British connections to the ruthless exploitation of local opportunities, a task that required both commercial and political skills.

Their counterparts on the other side of the world faced the same challenge. Australia's transformation from a remote prison farm heavily dependent on imperial subsidy was mainly the work of local free settlers and merchants who created a pastoral industry and forced the abandonment of London's attempts to restrain inland expansion. Invoking the rule that the aboriginal peoples had no rights of ownership (the *terra nullius* doctrine), 'squatters' seized the colony's principal asset, its far-reaching grasslands, bargaining with the Crown – their nominal possessor – for the lowest land charge. While both South and Western Australia had been founded directly by private interests from Britain, Victoria and Queensland were settled by migrants from the two original colonies, New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (later Tasmania). John Macarthur (1767–1834), who introduced the merino sheep, his son James (1798–1867), who made a Lombard Street marriage, and

William Charles Wentworth (1790–1872), explorer, trader, pastoralist, lawyer, politician and ‘booster’, were the key political architects of the pastoral interest and inveterate opponents of London’s ‘autocracy’.<sup>92</sup> Thomas Mort (1816–78), whose statue now stands near Sydney’s Circular Quay, created much of the financial and mercantile apparatus on which the wool trade depended. In New Zealand, where London’s annexation had been openly grudging, imperial policy was to restrict the area of settlement to a handful of enclaves. The sale of land by indigenous Maori, formally acknowledged by the treaty of Waitangi as owners of the soil, was to be strictly controlled. In the South Island, where the number of Maori was low (perhaps as few as 5,000 in the 1840s), there was direct settlement from Britain in Otago and Canterbury. But, in the North Island, local men did most to make New Zealand into a settler state. Isaac Featherston, superintendent of the Wellington province, eagerly pushed its boundaries inland to the Wairarapa and Manawatu.<sup>93</sup> Auckland interests pressed for occupation of the Waikato valley, the scene of major Anglo-Maori conflict in the mid-1860s.<sup>94</sup> But the crucial figure was Donald McLean, the government land agent and, not coincidentally, a major landowner himself in the Hawke’s Bay province.<sup>95</sup> McLean’s aggressive purchasing policy<sup>96</sup> stoked the settler appetite for land until the crisis was reached in the 1860s. The Maori wars that followed decided the question: henceforth New Zealand was to be a white settler state.

In all of these cases, settler control of the colonial state was a critical factor in local success. It was conceded by London in the 1840s (in British North America) and 1850s (in Australia and New Zealand) with almost complete local autonomy, as ‘responsible government’. It was the colonial state that decided what land could be granted, at what price it was sold, and where and from whom it should be bought for resale. The colonial state’s revenues could be used to subsidise railways, or pay for their building. The colonial state had the power (conceded by London after 1859) to protect local enterprise by tariffs against competition from Britain. In South Africa, the local equation was radically different. Here, the (British) settler bridgehead was feeble. As in New Zealand, it faced a tough local opponent: the African peoples along the Eastern Cape frontier. But the injection of migrants and capital that made New Zealand dynamic (with a white population of 300,000 after a mere thirty years of colonisation) was lacking at the Cape. A desultory trade in wool was the best it could manage. Regarding the colony

as a financial black hole after the costly frontier wars of the 1840s, London pulled back. For the next thirty years, no proconsul in Cape Town had the military means to command the northern interior, and there was no local entrepreneur with strong British connections to create a business empire on the necessary scale. Instead, the initiative passed to the Afrikaner frontiersmen, the trekkers or Boers. It was they, not the British colonial state, who seized the interior's resources of labour and land to create their trekker republics, not so much states as loose federations of their paramilitary bands, the notorious commandos.<sup>97</sup> So great was the Boers' distaste for fixed boundaries that they treated map-makers as spies.<sup>98</sup> Only where sea-power gave the British a foothold could they make their influence felt. They annexed Port Natal. When the trekkers (who had arrived before this imperial riposte) departed in dudgeon for the highveld interior, a precarious beachhead of traders and farmers grew up under the eye of the Zulu kingdom across the Tugela. This was Natal, the puny and troublesome offspring of the original Cape Colony.

But no settler bridgehead was a rival to India in power and importance in the mid-nineteenth century. Here a unique set of circumstances had permitted the growth of an exceptional Anglo-Oriental imperialism. More completely than anywhere else, the British in India had been able to take rapid command of local resources and turn them to their use. It had been the East India Company's victory at Plassey over the Bengal nawab, Siraj ud-Daulah, that had laid the foundation. Within eight years of Plassey, the Company had assumed the *diwan*, the right conferred by the Mughal ruler in Delhi to collect the land revenue of the subah of Bengal. In Bengal and the Carnatic (and wherever its rule was imposed), the Company inherited a long-established revenue system whose yield could be diverted to fill its deep pockets. It could also exploit India's commercial economy, for India had been, in textiles at least, the workshop of the world in the eighteenth century. Indian bankers advanced some of the credit on which the Company's campaigns against other Indian rulers had depended.<sup>99</sup> India's exports of opium, a Company monopoly, came to supply nearly one-fifth of its income.<sup>100</sup> India could also supply, through its market of military labour,<sup>101</sup> a wellspring of manpower not already attached to clan or feudal allegiance. The Company state could build up an army of nearly a quarter of a million men. It could also afford to hire from the Crown (at a cost of more than £1 million a year) between twenty and thirty

thousand British troops to stiffen its sepoy and act as a check upon unrest in its army.

With a revenue of around £30 million a year by the early 1850s (perhaps half that of Britain), the Indian government had a freedom of action no other colony matched. London constantly frowned on its expansionist tendencies, fearing disaster and financial collapse. One viceroy was sacked for defying its veto but usually Calcutta had its way in the end and the area ruled by the Company Raj was extended relentlessly. What drove the Company forward was partly the fear that its brittle regime could not take the strain of a turbulent zone on its external frontier or in the autonomous states that divided the tracts of Company rule.<sup>102</sup> To less sympathetic observers, the real cause could be found in the unreformed nature of the Company state. Denouncing the war against Burma in 1852, Lord Ellenborough, a former governor-general himself, ascribed the Indian government's aggression to the influence of 'certain . . . British merchants . . . in concert and connexion with the press at Calcutta, the movements of which I have always viewed with anxiety and distrust [because] the desire to push forward trade and make a money speculation is the feeling which actuates the press at Calcutta'.<sup>103</sup> But they were not the only culprits, since the pressure for war came from 'a large part of the civil and the whole of the military service'.<sup>104</sup> Jobs, plunder and perquisites – not a sense of imperial purpose – formed the compass they steered by. Indeed, it was not hard to see the Company's 'servants' in India as a selfish and self-appointed oligarchy whose ranks were replenished increasingly from the sons of old Company men.<sup>105</sup> 'We require some change which shall enable Englishmen to enter the service of the Indian government by other channels than one small college', argued *The Times*<sup>106</sup> – a reference to Haileybury, the Company's training school. Nor was this the only complaint. Manchester cotton merchants, hungry for markets, lambasted the Company's miserly spending on railways and roads: between 1834 and 1848, it had spent less than one half per cent of its revenues on improvements like this.<sup>107</sup> The Company's local mercantile allies, who often acted as agents in its officials' private affairs, were suspected of trying to keep out the competition from home – with the Company's help. No British exchange bank was allowed to start up in India until 1851, and then by mischance.<sup>108</sup>

It was thus hardly surprising that, when the Company's failings were put on brutal display at the time of the Mutiny in 1857, it

found few friends in Britain. The Mutiny had been a stunning shock to the Company: its intelligence system had failed almost completely.<sup>109</sup> The British were lucky that the Mutiny (or 'Great Rebellion') was not universal. Instead, it was largely confined to the Upper Ganges valley, although its effects spread out into the lightly ruled tracts of upland Central India. The main centres of revolt were in Delhi, where the Mughal emperor had been the Company's pensioner, and in Awadh (Oudh), whose Muslim nawab had been brusquely displaced by the British in the previous year. The Mutiny released some of the bitter resentments that the headlong expansion of Company power had built up over decades. The Company's apparent alliance with the Christian missions, and its disparaging treatment of the Mughal ruler and court, alarmed and enraged North Indian Muslim divines. Fear that the Company meant to treat other princely states as it had treated Awadh pushed the Nana Sahib, a Maratha prince, into open revolt. Agrarian unrest was fed by the hardship of once-prosperous peasant communities caught between the exactions of landlords and the loss of army employment, as the British revised their zones of recruitment. But it was the sepoy mutiny of May 1857, first at Meerut forty miles from Delhi, that set off the explosion. It revealed – or seemed to – that the Company's power could be easily broken.<sup>110</sup>

But the British hung on and assembled an army in the newly conquered Punjab. They had recaptured Delhi by the end of the year. A large British army, rushed out from Europe, smashed its way up the Ganges, exacting savage revenge for the murder of British women and children and imposing what was seen (by many British observers) as a white reign of terror. Although resistance smouldered on for more than a year, the real back of the revolt was broken in months, largely because there was little to hold its disparate elements together. The Mutiny had been, nonetheless, an extraordinary crisis. It demolished at a blow much of the mid-Victorians' complacency and challenged their self-confidence. As soon as the worst was over, the Company was called to account.

The reaction was penal. The Company state was abolished by Parliament with hardly a whimper. Its enormous army was cut down by half. Under the new regime, civilian values were meant to prevail. Railway construction to open up India to Lancashire's wares became an urgent priority. The result was a paradox. In theory, the great garrison state that the Company's servants had made would now



be the springboard for British expansion across southern Asia. India's wealth (in money and men) would be pledged more completely to the imperial cause. And so it was – up to a point. But there was a price to be paid. When the Company's army was shown to resemble not so much the sword of Achilles as his vulnerable heel, the effect on the disposition of Britain's own military manpower was bound to be large. 'The Government of India', a pre-Mutiny Viceroy had warned, 'unlike the Colonies of the Crown, has no element of national strength on which it can fall back in a country where the entire English community is but a handful of scattered strangers'.<sup>111</sup> Since creating a large British 'colony' in India was out of the question, the gap had to be filled by a military force. From the Mutiny onwards, it became axiomatic that the number of British soldiers in India must never be less than half the strength of the Indian army: even with a reduced sepoy army, that meant a far larger contingent than in pre-Mutiny days. The reward (for Britain's taxpayers) was great; the strain on the army unremitting. In the emergent world-system, India's place had been set – as Britain's great 'barrack in an Eastern sea'.

Britain's empire of trade, like its settlement and Indian empires, also depended upon the success of expatriate Britons – in digging themselves into the local economy, enlisting local support, and enlarging the scale of export production and the consumption of imports. As we have seen, British merchants and their 'houses' were spread around the globe by the 1840s and were well placed to exploit the great expansion of trade that set in after 1850. But the extent to which they held the commercial initiative varied considerably. In Brazil, several large British firms held a commanding position in the coffee and sugar trades, and Brazil remained Britain's best Latin American customer until the end of the century. But the growth of British commercial influence really set in only after the rise of the Sao Paulo 'coffee economy' in the late 1860s, and the building of the Santos–Sao Paulo railway in 1868.<sup>112</sup> In Argentina, where British merchants had been on the scene early, their influence, and that of their *porteno* allies, had been checked by the long reign of the *caudillo* Rosas (1828–52). The British naval blockade in 1846–8 had made matters worse, and it was an internal shift within the Argentine's politics that really opened the way for commercial expansion after mid-century. Likewise in Peru, where the mercantile house of Anthony Gibb pioneered the export of guano (the dung of sea-birds, an agricultural fertiliser), British hopes of freer trade were forced to

hold fire until the dominant Peruvian faction had discovered the fiscal appeal of international commerce.<sup>113</sup> In the Levant and Middle East, the free trade agreement that Palmerston had exacted in 1838 opened the Ottoman Empire to British merchants and encouraged the formation of Anglo-Greek firms, like the Rallis or Rodocanachis.<sup>114</sup> But it was the collapse of Egypt's attempt to be a textile producer, its switch to becoming a vast cotton plantation, and the 'cotton famine' that arose during the Civil War in America, that gave British merchants their niche in the trade of Alexandria, Egypt's main port-city. In Southeast Asia, British control of Singapore after 1819, and its free-port status, made it the base from which British merchants could seek cargoes and customers across a wide maritime region. Opium and guns were their early stock-in-trade.<sup>115</sup> Improved sailing ships (especially the clipper) gave them an advantage over junk-using Chinese, and the Navy's onslaught on Malay *orang laut* (sea-people) as a pirate community removed some of their local competitors. But it was still merchant entrepreneurs from South China who controlled local trade and the production, from which expatriate interests were largely excluded.<sup>116</sup> And then there was China.

In China, the British had tried using direct military force to drive their trade into a huge commercial economy with all the allure of a modern eldorado. Two treaties imposed at the bayonet's point gave British merchants (and other Westerners) a privileged position at numerous ports of entry (the number reached ninety-two by 1914) on China's coasts and rivers – the so-called 'treaty-ports'. In Shanghai, which commanded the immense Yangtse basin, the 'land regulations' of 1845 set aside a zone where foreign residents could buy or lease property, forming a settlement with its own municipal council. British merchants and others were free to import goods at a modest tariff of 5 per cent by value, and were exempt from interference by Chinese officials. Their rights were protected by a small army of consuls – perhaps forty in all – whose influence was backed by the threat of a gunboat's arrival in case of a quarrel. From 1854, when its pressing need of a revenue to counter the Taiping insurgency secured Peking's approval, a Chinese 'Imperial Maritime Customs Service' was set up with a European staff to regulate the collection of tariffs and duties. Under these conditions, British merchants could purchase the teas and silks in demand in the West, and exchange them for cotton goods and opium, the largest import, whose traffic was formally legalised in 1858.<sup>117</sup> But, although a number of

British firms, including Jardine Matheson, Dent's and Butterfield and Swire, set up on the coast, it was far from clear by the mid-1870s how much China could promise. The inland trade remained in the hands of Chinese merchants, sometimes acting as *compradors* for the treaty-port British. Indeed, by the late 1860s, the consuls were reporting that British merchants were being driven out of the inland trade altogether, and that many treaty-ports were redundant.<sup>118</sup> Inland residence (i.e. away from the treaty-ports) was the merchants' panacea, but the consuls rejected this as a vast extension of their administrative burdens and practically unenforceable, a view strongly endorsed in London.<sup>119</sup> Behind the barriers of its language and its complex currency system, and without Western-style banks or commercial property law, China was 'singularly successful at checking foreign economic penetration', remarks a modern authority.<sup>120</sup>

The response of the British was a straw in the wind, and not just in China. Where they held the advantage was in commercial services. Jardine Matheson and Swires both became ship-owners. Their shipping lines 'Ewo' and 'Taikoo' plied China's coastal waters and rivers. They provided insurance and banking and dealt in bills of exchange. A new British interest arose on the coast with the formation in 1864 of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, designed to attract Chinese capital as well as British. This trend was mirrored elsewhere in the world. It was strengthened by the technological changes that favoured British business: the spread of the steamship to South America, West Africa and (with the opening of the Suez Canal) to the Indian Ocean and East Asia; and by the telegraph as a vector of credit as well as price information. As the exchanges between the different compartments of the global economy grew swifter and easier, the business of managing them became more and more profitable. A new kind of empire was now in the making.

### The Victorian pattern established

The years from the 1830s to the 1870s were the critical phase of Britain's emergence as a global power in command of a world-system. This was partly a matter of geographical range. Before 1830, Britain had been overwhelmingly an Atlantic power with a great eastern outpost. By the 1870s, the scale of British activity in the Pacific, East Asia,

Southeast Asia, the Middle East and East Africa, as well as Latin America, showed that almost no part of the world outside Europe and the United States was immune from their interference. But it was also a measure of the rapid maturing of Britain's connections with the three different kinds of empire that mid-Victorian expansion had made: the 'sub-empires' of settlement, trade and rule. It was by drawing them into a closer relation (more of function than of form) and exploiting the different benefits that each had to offer, that the British preserved in the more competitive world of the late nineteenth century the geopolitical vantage won in 1815.

The transformation of British society had been vital to this. Before 1830, powerful networks and interests had championed the claims of the old 'mercantilist' empire and defended its privileges. The abolition of slavery and the demand for free trade had threatened to sweep them away. But the economic and social development of mid-Victorian Britain was not hostile to empire. Instead, it hugely strengthened Britain's ability to act as the mainspring of a new global system.

It was the scale and the speed with which the British adapted to the promise of global expansion that gave them their chance. First, the British Isles had become by the 1860s and 1870s a great emigrant reservoir. By the mid-1870s, over eight million people (three-quarters of them British and Irish) had left British ports for destinations outside Europe. The habit of migration had become deeply entrenched since the first great rush in the 1830s. 1.3 million left in the 1850s, 1.5 million in the 1860s and a further 1.2 million in the first half of the 1870s. Nor, after 1870, was it chiefly an Irish phenomenon.<sup>121</sup> The British were not the only Europeans to migrate, but they did so earlier, in larger numbers and more persistently than any other people in Europe. Nor of course did most British migrants go to Britain's settlement colonies: instead, two-thirds went to the United States (there were only two years between 1853 and 1899 when the American share fell below 50 per cent). But the American magnet had a broader effect. It helped to make Britain an emigrant society, in which the appeal of mobility and the moral legitimacy of settling a 'new' country were widely accepted. It helped to inspire the idea, trumpeted in Charles Dilke's *Greater Britain* (1869), that the British were a 'world-people'. 'In 1866 and 1867', ran Dilke's famous opening sentence, 'I followed England round the world.' The idea 'which has been... my fellow and my guide... is a conception, however imperfect, of the grandeur of the race, already

girdling the earth.<sup>122</sup> It was the most positive proof that the migrant societies growing up in the settlement colonies had a viable future as non-dependent communities. And America, as much as Britain's own settler states, encouraged the British 'at home' to see themselves as an 'old' community recreating itself in new lands overseas – a vital part of their colonising ideology.

Secondly, Britain had become an open economy with the adoption of free trade in the 1840s and 1850s (the repeal of the Navigation laws in 1850–1 almost completed the process). The motives behind this have been fiercely debated. They may have owed more to the political need to rebalance commercial and agrarian interests than to commercial calculation.<sup>123</sup> But, once enacted, free trade reinforced Britain's role as the world's principal entrepot, the market-place to which the world's goods could be carried without commercial restriction. It removed any limit on the City's development as the eyes and ears of the new world economy, its banker, insurer, shipping-agent and dealer. It allowed British merchants to open commercial relations with any part of the world and offer its produce to the widest selection of buyers through the London exchanges. Thirdly, Britain had become an investing economy, with an investment income that grew fourteen-fold between 1830 and 1875 from under £4 million to £58 million.<sup>124</sup> The mobilisation of savings that 'railway mania' had encouraged, as well as domestic prosperity, created a fund for investment abroad, at first in government bonds and then, increasingly, in the building of railways and other infrastructure in India, the Americas and Australasia. Here was the basis for not just an empire of trade, but also an empire of overseas property.

Lastly, it was not just a matter of investment, trade and migration. Social and economic change in Britain had speeded the shift towards a more diverse, pluralistic and open society. While the Anglican aristocracy and gentry continued to dominate parliamentary politics, they were forced to accommodate urban, commercial, industrial, non-conformist, Catholic and even working class interests. The Evangelical and humanitarian pressure groups, already very active by the 1830s, recruited fresh allies among the newly enfranchised. Much of the appeal of Gladstonian liberalism (whose influence extended far beyond the ranks of the Liberal Party) lay in its promise of a political system, attuned to the moral concerns of the whole range of classes, and free from the bias of legalised privilege – so-called 'Old Corruption'. The

result was to create within British society vocal support for liberal and universalist values, and their diffusion abroad. This was an 'alternative Britain' to which those disenchanted with its more masterful face could turn for assistance. No single version of empire ruled over opinion in Britain: it was precisely the nature of the British world-system that it embodied a number of alternative visions of British expansion. 'All ranks, all classes are equally interested', said the historian-polemicist James Anthony Froude of Britain's colonial expansion. Manufacturers wanted new markets, landowners would welcome the colonial safety-valve for rural discontent. 'Most of all is it the concern of the working men' who had the chance to emigrate.<sup>125</sup>

Left to themselves, the different visions of empire espoused by mercantile, humanitarian, missionary, settler, scientific, official and military interests might have led to political stalemate. The loathing of radicals for Palmerstonian bellicosity (as the last reckless gasp of an obsolete aristocracy); the mistrust of India as a source of corruption and the forced militarisation of British society (a large British garrison there would mean conscription at home warned the radical professor Goldwin Smith<sup>126</sup>); the grumbling unease at the violence and cruelty of colonial rule (the Royal Commission into the Jamaican disturbances of 1865 described their suppression as 'barbarous, wanton and cruel');<sup>127</sup> the indifference of those concerned with the settlement colonies for the future of India, and *vice versa*: these and other divisions might have undermined any consensus on the British world-system. Parties and governments might have feared all or any expansion as too acrimonious, putting at risk their domestic priorities. A different tradition of political liberty (one less anchored in property rights), or (at the other extreme) a run of defeats in colonial warfare, might have changed the terms of debate altogether. In practice, however, the scope for real disagreement was surprisingly narrow.

One reason for this was that the conflict of interests was more apparent than real. Manchester free traders might dislike Palmerston's wars.<sup>128</sup> But they wanted to 'open up' India to their cottons and safeguard their access to markets in China. There was no more ardent free trader than Sir John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong who hoped for a British protectorate over much of South China.<sup>129</sup> Missionary leaders distrusted colonial officialdom. But they looked to London for help against predatory settlers, and to extend its imperial umbrella over their new fields of activity. Scientific and humanitarian lobbies

had to convince British opinion that its real interests were global, and should not be frustrated by local obstruction that was stuck in the past. The rapprochement of interests was also ideological, and sprang from a common commitment to ‘progress’ – the real moral warrant of Victorian imperialism. Thus authoritarian rule on the ‘crown colony’ principle (where the executive controlled an appointive legislature) was originally justified as necessary when the ‘British’ were too few and ‘free people of colour too numerous’.<sup>130</sup> But it acquired a new moral purpose as the way of restraining an oppressive minority of white settlers or planters. Both positions assumed that only *enlightened* British rule, not its coarse local variant, could redeem Asians and Africans from their slough of stagnation, or worse. It was precisely on these grounds that John Stuart Mill, the scourge of colonial crimes in Jamaica, excused the denial of representative government to the people of India.<sup>131</sup> Humanitarians and missionaries might decry the mistreatment of indigenous peoples. But they were wholly committed to the moral obsessions of Victorian society, and its strictures on gender, the place of the family and the treatment of women.<sup>132</sup> Few mid-Victorians would have resisted the claim – however romantic their views – that ‘commercial’ societies like their own were richer and stronger because their institutions and mores favoured the advancement of knowledge and technology. The common ingredient of most of these attitudes was a vulgar conception of ‘race’ – not a scientific racism but a catch-all presumption that variations in skin-shade, religion and climate were an accurate predictor of civilisational capacity. Some Victorians discovered by personal experience the limitations of this theory, but not very many.

These trends in British society were part of the story. They were matched by the changes in Britain’s spheres of expansion. The sudden death-crisis of the Company state gave London the chance to impose British priorities on a self-centred expatriate Anglo-Indian regime. The remnants of the Company’s old merchant-warrior ethos were thrown on the scrap-heap. India was now to be much more thoroughly integrated into Britain’s pattern of trade and investment – a process accelerated by the cutting of the Suez Canal and the extension of the telegraph and submarine cable. But, as quickly became clear, the military foundations of the new British Raj also demanded a closer strategic connection, and imposed willy-nilly a general revision of imperial defence. Once London had to find more than 70,000 soldiers for the Indian garrison (and perhaps more in an emergency – 90,000 had been needed during

the Mutiny), the strain on the rest of its imperial commitments became overwhelming. 'In truth', remarked Gladstone, 'England must keep a military bank on which India can draw checks at pleasure.'<sup>133</sup> To make the books balance, British troops were withdrawn from New Zealand and Canada – occasioning a furious protest from the New Zealand ministers. By 1872, the War Office expected that, of the British troops stationed abroad, fifty-seven of its line battalions (the infantry backbone) would be garrisoning India, with a mere thirteen in the rest of the colonies.<sup>134</sup> In return, London expected that both the British and Indian troops stationed in India would form Britain's strategic reserve in the world east of Suez, to be charged on the Indian budget except for the 'extraordinary' costs of an expedition or war. In political terms, the effect was far-reaching. Henceforth, any concession London might be willing to make to Indian self-rule had an iron limitation. No change could be made that imperilled India's military budget (the largest item of spending), nor the huge remittance it made for the hire of its garrison. And, as the demand from Lancashire for more Indian railways (and thus more Indian customers) was felt more directly, the burden of Indian debt also rose steeply. India was locked into the British 'system' far more completely than under the Company Raj.

In the settlement colonies, the signs were less obvious. They enjoyed internal self-government (except at the Cape) by mid-century, keeping at bay the concern of London-based interests for their indigenous peoples, a potent source of friction. Their white populations had grown. They contained large urban centres. Their economic and cultural institutions were comparable to those of provincial Britain. But in two important respects they were being bound more closely to the old 'Mother-Country'. To compete in the global economy required heavy investment in the infrastructure of transport, and ever greater reliance on the shipping and sea-lanes that carried their products to Europe. Both drove them into a deeper dependence on London and Liverpool, and sharpened the sense that their credit and capital were only as strong as their reputation in Britain. The colossal priority of economic development made it even less likely that they would cease to depend on British sea-power for strategic protection. Secondly, as the scale of their societies grew, their points of contact with British institutions and interests, the circulation of persons as well as ideas, and Britain's significance as the model of modernity (as well as a warning of its costs and risks), also grew rapidly. The only alternative to 'British



connection' was a painful march back into colonial isolation or, in the Canadian case, to embrace annexation to the next-door republic. Neither appealed much. Something similar was happening in the invisible empire of commerce and credit. At the London end of the axis, the growth of the capital market centred on the stock exchange, the rise of specialised financial entrepreneurs, the spread of risk through limited liability, and the increasing volume of economic information available through cable and telegraph, increased the capacity of the imperial centre to trade and invest in overseas countries. At much the same time, improvements in transport brought by steam technology drove prices down and exposed local merchants, like those in Latin America, to fiercer competition from abroad. Combined with the need to raise more and more capital for railways, harbours and urban improvements, the result was to strengthen British-based enterprise (including banks and insurance companies) over local concerns that lacked their resources and network of contacts. The foundations were laid for what one writer has called the 'Londonisation' of international commerce.<sup>135</sup> London built up its property empire and amassed an income from services. In Latin America, the escape into autarky became a subject for romance.

By the mid-1870s, a set of conjunctures and crises, scarcely imaginable some forty years earlier, had largely reshaped Britain's place in the world. More by default than by any design, they endowed Britain with the military, economic and demographic resources to sustain a world-system, given reasonable prudence. How that system was challenged, defended, reinvented and broken the chapters that follow are meant to explain.