

# The Gift of Civilization: How Imperial Britons Saw Their Mission in India

By David Robinson, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.30.17

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Lord Clive of Britain meeting with Mir Jafar of Bengal India in 1757. Painting from Wikimedia.

In 1840, the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay imagined the fall of the British Empire. At the time, Britain was the most powerful nation in the world, and it controlled colonies far and wide. Macaulay envisioned a future after it collapsed, like the Roman and Greek empires that came and went before it.

He pictured someone from New Zealand, a British colony, visiting London after the fall. The visitor might stand "on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins," he thought.

Sixty years earlier, in his book "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," the historian Edward Gibbon also discussed the British Empire. Britain had taken over New Zealand and was ruling over the Maori people who lived there, and Gibbon expressed hope that the British would make them more "civilized."

Both thinkers were drawing a connection between Britain and the great empires that came before it. Gibbon thought that Britain would bring European-style civilization to new corners of the planet, and Macauley saw further into the future to a time when the empire had fallen, but its history and culture continued to influence people in its former colonies.

Macaulay had reasons to think that the British Empire might not last forever. The colonies in America had already broken away from Britain in the Revolutionary War. Then came the French Revolution, which scared governments all over the world with the threat of popular uprisings, and was followed by the rise of Napoleon, who challenged Britain's military control. Amid these changes, the strength of the British Empire started to look uncertain.

The Greek and Roman empires had fallen, as had empires in India, Mongolia and Persia. Was the British Empire destined to crumble, too? What would it mean if it did?

These questions were a major cause of concern in Britain, because colonialism played an important role in the way the British people saw themselves. Many people thought of Britain as carrying on the traditions of Greece and Rome. In operating colonies all over the world, they saw themselves as spreading those traditions to new peoples.

Adam Rogers and Richard Hingley are two modern historians who study the British Empire. In 2010, they published a paper discussing Gibbon and the ways the British thought about their empire in the 1700s and 1800s, arguing that the British drew on the texts and traditions of past empires as they developed their own ideas about civilization. They used the history of empires to explain and justify their own empire.

For example, when Britain took over India, Macaulay compared it to the ancient conqueror Alexander. Like great countries before it, Britain expanded its territories, in part, to expand its glory and power.

Naturally, this led to fears that the native people in British colonies would reject British rule. One British administrator in India wrote: "Our dangers lie in the vast mass of people whom we have subjected to our rule in this country, and who would gladly rise and shake off the yoke of the [foreigners]."



Another problem was that the vision of Britain as a glorious superpower was at odds with the way many British were starting to think about politics and government. Ideas like democracy and self-rule were becoming more and more popular. How did the British hang on to these beliefs at the same time that they were ruling over faraway peoples?

Some got out of the bind by arguing that colonialism was actually helpful for civilizations that are in early stages of growth. They made a comparison between Britain's relationship to its colonies and the historical relationship of Rome to Britain.

When the Roman Empire was at its height, it ruled over Britain, and when it fell, Britain grew into its own empire. According to some, Roman rule in Britain helped the country move forward. Therefore, some argued, Britain would help its colonies by temporarily ruling over them.

This is how Charles Trevelyan saw things. He was a British administrator in India during the time India was a British colony. He wrote that he hoped that "the Indians [would]... soon stand in the same position toward us in which we once stood towards the Romans." At first, he said, the British and the Romans were enemies, but in the end, they became friends.

According to Trevelyan's thinking, the British would pass on the traditions that Rome had passed to them.

## In Britain's image

Thus, the British imagined remaking India in their own image. By laying down British rules and customs, Trevelyan wrote, the empire was bringing about a “change for the better in the character of the [Indian] people.”

The Romans had adopted the Greek way of life, and the British had adopted the Roman way of life. Now, the Indians would adopt the English way of life. As Macaulay famously put it, British rule in India would bring about “a class of persons, Indian in blood and [color], but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

## Decline and fall

Though he thought Britain was helping the people in its colonies, he believed that the empire would eventually fall. Even so, he thought that the tastes, ideas and way of life that the British Empire was spreading to its colonies would live on. At that point, he wrote, Britain would have completed its “civilizing mission.”

What is this mission, exactly? Macaulay saw it as the movement toward reason and justice and away from barbarism. He imagined a chain of civilizations – from Greece to Rome to Britain to New Zealand – each incorporating the traditions of the civilization that came before it moving beyond them. So while empires may fall, the project of civilization would continue. He wrote, “In the far future, Britain has continued the cycle of European superiority.”

*David Robinson is a Ph.D. researcher on 19th-century British travel literature on India and Italy at the University of Nottingham in England.*

## Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "Decline and fall."

*Though he thought Britain was helping the people in its colonies, he believed that the empire would eventually fall. Even so, he thought that the tastes, ideas and way of life that the British Empire was spreading to its colonies would live on.*

Which of the following details from the article BEST supports the idea that Britain's colonies reflected the influence of hundreds of years of colonization?

- (A) According to some, Roman rule in Britain helped the country move forward. Therefore, some argued, Britain would help its colonies by temporarily ruling over them.
- (B) What is this mission, exactly? Macaulay saw it as the movement towards reason and justice and away from barbarism.
- (C) He imagined a chain of civilizations – from Greece to Rome to Britain to New Zealand – each incorporating the traditions of the civilization that came before it moving beyond them.
- (D) He wrote, "In the far future, Britain has continued the cycle of European superiority."

- 2 According to the article, opposition to the British Empire was voiced by British citizens, but the empire was also worried about revolts in the colonies organized by native people.

Which selection from the article BEST supports the idea outlined above?

- (A) Our dangers lie in the vast mass of people whom we have subjected to our rule in this country, and who would gladly rise and shake off the yoke of the [foreigners].
- (B) Another problem was that the vision of Britain as a glorious superpower was at odds with the way many British were starting to think about politics and government.
- (C) They made a comparison between Britain relationship to its colonies and the historical relationship of Rome to Britain.
- (D) According to Trevelyan's thinking, the British would pass on the traditions that Rome had passed to them.

- 3 Read the selections from the introduction [paragraphs 1-16].

*Ideas like democracy and self-rule were becoming more and more popular. How did the British hang on to these beliefs at the same time that they were ruling over faraway peoples?*

*Some got out of the bind by arguing that colonialism was actually helpful for civilizations that are in early stages of growth.*

The author uses the word "bind" to mean:

- (A) a close relationship that is difficult to separate without conflict
- (B) a way to get out of a difficult situation without making a decision
- (C) a type of argument that focuses on the positive aspects of an issue
- (D) a difficult situation where every option results in a dilemma

- 4 Read the sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-15].

*Another problem was that the vision of Britain as a glorious superpower was at odds with the way many British were starting to think about politics and government.*

Which of the following words from the article provides the BEST context clues to the meaning of the word "superpower"?

- (A) most powerful nation in the world
- (B) controlled colonies far and wide
- (C) great empires that came before it
- (D) texts and traditions of past empires

## Answer Key

- 1 Read the selection from the section "Decline and fall."

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