

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

By David Robinson, *The Conversation*, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.31.17

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

In the late 1500s, Britain began exploring unknown parts of the world and setting up colonies, communities that they controlled from afar. Over the next few hundred years, it continued to take over more land. Eventually, it grew into the largest empire in all of history. It lasted until the mid-1900s, when the last of Britain's colonies became independent countries.

As their power grew, people in England started thinking more about what it meant to control an empire. Historians Edward Gibbon and Thomas Babington Macaulay, for example, compared the British Empire to the great empires of the past. Gibbon was alive during the early years of the empire, while Macaulay watched it grow even larger and imagined a future in which it falls.

Gibbon published a book called "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" in 1776. It told the history of the end of Rome, the last great empire before Britain; Britain itself had been part of the Roman Empire at one point.

The British Empire was on the rise at the time. Britain had colonies in North America, Africa and Asia. The British had also taken over New Zealand and were ruling over the Maori people who lived there.

Gibbon discussed the rising British Empire in his book, and he mentioned the Maori people in particular. He expressed hope that the British would make them more "civilized."

Macaulay was a British historian writing about 60 years later. In 1840, he wrote about an imaginary future when the British Empire had fallen. He tried to picture what that would look like, imagining London as a place dotted with historical ruins. London is the central city of England and the United Kingdom of Great Britain.

He imagined someone from New Zealand visiting this future London. The visitor might stand "on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins," he wrote. In other words, they would look at London the way the British looked at the ruins in Rome.

Gibbon and Macaulay are just two examples, but they show how the British started to think about their position in history as their power grew. Like past empires, they saw their colonies as a way to spread their way of life.



There was a problem, though. At the same time that Britain was building an empire, new ideas about government were becoming popular. Many people in Britain believed in democracy and thought that people should rule themselves. What right, some asked, did the British have to take other people's land and rule over them?

The response of many was that being ruled by the British was good for people in other parts of the world. Britain shared knowledge and advances in the places where they set up colonies. While some people there might not like being ruled by the British, it would help them in the end.

Some people used Rome as an example. When the Roman Empire was at its height, it ruled over Britain. When it fell, Britain grew into its own empire. According to some, Roman rule in Britain helped the country move forward, and the British Empire would help its colonies in the same way.

In Britain's image

This is how Charles Trevelyan saw things. He was a British administrator in India when it was under British rule. 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. They would do so by reshaping India, making it more British. 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."

So while empires fall, the project of civilization would continue on.

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 section "In Britain's image."

Which sentence from the section suggests that some people thought the British Empire helped people in the areas it colonized?

- (A) 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."
- (B) At first, he said, the British and the Romans were enemies, but in the end, they became friends.
- (C) According to Trevelyan's thinking, the British would pass on the traditions that Rome had passed to them.
- (D) 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."

2 Which sentence from the article supports the inference that the British Empire's legacy would not end when the empire ended?

- (A) In 1840, he wrote about an imaginary future when the British Empire had fallen.
- (B) Though he thought Britain was helping the people in its colonies, he believed that the empire would eventually fall.
- (C) Even so, he thought that the tastes, ideas and way of life that the British Empire was spreading to its colonies would live on.
- (D) At that point, he wrote, Britain would have completed its "civilizing mission."

3 Read the selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-11].

When the Roman Empire was at its height, it ruled over Britain. When it fell, Britain grew into its own empire.

Which of the following options, if it replaced the word "height" in the selection above, would CHANGE the meaning of the first sentence?

- (A) peak
- (B) beginning
- (C) strongest
- (D) supreme

- 4 Read the selection from the section "In Britain's image." Then, fill in the blank.

According to Trevelyan's thinking, the British would pass on the traditions that Rome had passed to them. They would do so by reshaping India, making it more British.

The word "reshaping" in the selection above tells the reader that _____.

- (A) the British Empire planned to make changes in India
- (B) the British Empire admired Indian culture
- (C) the British Empire was losing power quickly
- (D) the British Empire struggled to control its colonies

Answer Key

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