

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

By David Robinson, The Conversation on 08.31.17

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

The politician and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay imagined, in 1840, the fall of a great empire. He conjured a future “when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul’s.”

This was a nod by Macaulay to Edward Gibbon’s hope 60 years previously – expressed in “Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” – that great scholars might eventually arise from the Maori population as a result of the civilising influence of British colonial rule. Bookending 1780 and 1840, therefore, are reflections on the rise and fall of empires and civilisations – metaphorically and literally illustrated by their successors – travellers who sit among the crumbling ruins recording the ultimate failing of even mankind’s greatest achievements.

The loss of America, the French Revolution, Napoleonic adventuring and a radical climate in which the middle classes were alarmed at the sight of Chartist crowds marching in the streets, also suggested disquieting visions of the future for British elites. The Greco-Roman empires had fallen, Hindu culture and Mogul power had declined in India. Was the British Empire inevitably destined to crumble, like Shelley's Ozymandias?

Linking these concerns was British self-identification as successors of Greco-Roman antiquity – as having inherited the mantle of the “cradle of civilization.” In their 2010 paper on Gibbon, British academics Adam Rogers and Richard Hingley note how:

The British drew upon the classical past through an interactive mutual relationship between classical texts, scholarship and politics; through this approach they developed intellectual discourses about both cultural superiority and decline.

During the 1833 East India Bill debate, Macaulay described Britain's appropriation of the glory of ancient empires. Britain was:

The most renowned of Western Conquerors ... beyond the point where the phalanx of Alexander refused to proceed ... a territory larger and more populous than France, Spain, Italy and Germany put together ... the world has seen nothing similar.

The Indian elephant in the rooms of the British cabinet and the East India Company was the insecurity of their eastern empire. A colonial administrator in India, Samuel Sneade Brown, wrote home to his mother: "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 'feringees' [foreigners]."



Equally thorny was the ambivalence of continental conquest by a nation committed to representative government. In justification, the British drew parallels with their own relationship with the Roman empire. The colonial administrator Charles Trevelyan described Rome's conquest of Britain – “[how] the acquisitions made by superiority in war, were consolidated by superiority in the arts of peace; and the remembrance of the original violence was lost in that of the benefits which resulted from it.” Imposition “from without” was, he wrote, necessary because “the instances in which nations have worked their way to a high degree of civilisation from domestic resources only are extremely rare.”

Trevelyan boldly hoped that “the Indians will ... soon stand in the same position toward us in which we once stood towards the Romans ... from being obstinate enemies, the Britons soon became attached and confiding friends.”

Thus, the British equated contemporary Indians with their pre-Roman selves – and their contemporary selves with the Romans. As the Romans had civilised and befriended the British, the British would do the same for India, justifying imperial imposition and allaying fears of being “swept off the face of Upper India like chaff.”

In Britain's image

The Romans had offered a sense of inclusion and common purpose – and the British envisaged assimilating India in their own image. “The past history of the world authorises us to believe that the movement which is taking place in India,” Trevelyan wrote, suggested a “decided change for the better in the character of the people.”

The Romans had adopted Greek tastes, and Britain was acculturated by the Romans – now the Anglicist policy of educating India in the English language would create, as Macaulay famously put it, “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

Classical discourse thus informed imperial policy. But it was also part of metropolitan debate advocating political reform, which aimed for middle-class inclusion rather than universal suffrage. Trevelyan noted how the Romano-British civilising precedent began among the upper and middle classes – the rich, the learned, the men of business. Indian reform would lead to “a national representative assembly” but, like back home, comprising the middle and upper-classes.

Equally, British working-class education was developed largely on the Indian model, associating the British lower-classes with colonial natives, justifying patriarchal oversight and political exclusion. Thus, images of empire are also visions of home.

Decline and fall

Finally, returning to civilisational decline, Macaulay conceded:

The sceptre may pass away from us ... There is an empire exempt from all natural causes of decay. Those triumphs are the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism; that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws. The message here is the same as the New Zealander at St Paul's. In the far future, Britain has continued the cycle of European superiority. The Greco-Roman torch of Western civilisation – which was once passed to the British – has migrated to the newly civilised Southern Hemisphere. In Macaulay's future, Britain has completed its “civilising mission.”

In such a vision, Macaulay employs classical discourse to give value to Britain's Indian empire and soothe fears of civilisational decline. As Macaulay said of his major work, the *History of England*: “I have had the year 2000, and often the year 3000, often in my mind.”

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 following sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-12].

The Indian elephant in the rooms of the British cabinet and the East India Company was the insecurity of their eastern empire.

Which selection from the introduction BEST supports this idea?

- (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 'feringees' [foreigners].
- (B) Equally thorny was the ambivalence of continental conquest by a nation committed to representative government. In justification, the British drew parallels with their own relationship with the Roman empire.
- (C) Imposition "from without" was, he wrote, necessary because "the instances in which nations have worked their way to a high degree of civilisation from domestic resources only are extremely rare."
- (D) Thus, the British equated contemporary Indians with their pre-Roman selves – and their contemporary selves with the Romans.

- 2 Read the selection from the section "In Britain's image."

The Romans had offered a sense of inclusion and common purpose – and the British envisaged assimilating India in their own image. "The past history of the world authorises us to believe that the movement which is taking place in India," Trevelyan wrote, suggested a "decided change for the better in the character of the people."

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from this selection?

- (A) While the British Empire aimed to civilize people in its colonies, this justification did not supersede the fact that forced colonization was immoral.
- (B) While the British Empire established India as a colony to spread British culture and identity, the Indian people resisted this change because they valued their own culture.
- (C) The British Empire justified colonizing lands of native people by arguing the Romans had done the same to them, and the Roman influence vastly advanced British culture.
- (D) The British Empire's goal was to spread the British identity throughout the world, thereby creating a world unified by one British identity.

3 The author uses a thoughtful tone.

Which selection from the article BEST reflects that tone?

- (A) The politician and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay imagined, in 1840, the fall of a great empire. He conjured a future “when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul’s.”
- (B) The Greco-Roman empires had fallen, Hindu culture and Mogul power had declined in India. Was the British Empire inevitably destined to crumble, like Shelley’s Ozymandias?
- (C) As the Romans had civilised and befriended the British, the British would do the same for India, justifying imperial imposition and allaying fears of being “swept off the face of Upper India like chaff.”
- (D) Classical discourse thus informed imperial policy. But it was also part of metropolitan debate advocating political reform, which aimed for middle-class inclusion rather than universal suffrage.

4 Read the sentence from the article.

Linking these concerns was British self-identification as successors of Greco-Roman antiquity – as having inherited the mantle of the “cradle of civilization.”

Which phrase from the article BEST emphasizes what the author means by “Greco-Roman antiquity”?

- (A) drew upon the classical past
- (B) intellectual discourses
- (C) cultural superiority and decline
- (D) superiority in the arts of peace

Answer Key

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