

**HIS323 Written Assignment**  
**Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln**  
**Britain's Imperial and Colonial Past in the Long 19th Century**

**To what extent was the growth of the British Empire influenced by the idea of a civilising mission?**

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### **Introduction**

The posed question of how the civilising mission shaped the British strategy and success of expanding its worldwide empire will be critically explored within the following assignment.

In the timespan covering the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the Empire of Britain spread rapidly. It proved to be founded on the rise of global capitalism, 'an international order, underwritten by Britain' (Jackson, 2013, p.9), whilst conveying a sense of strategic superiority within itself. At its height, the British Empire was temporarily made up of 607 colonies, and four dominions with their own parliaments, that were still subject to the British crown. The people under the rule of the British monarchs represented almost all human races of the world (Der Spiegel, 1979).

A shift to a territorial empire of conquest and settlement began to shape the British nation's politics, and the direction it was headed. The sometimes relatively small colonial states it established, were able to gain remarkable power over the residents of the countries they settled in. This was an effective strategy for the 'epochal process' (Jackson, 2013, p.11) of erupting an international empire, fuelled by a so called "civilising mission". Thereby, colonies introduced the indigenous population to massive economic, political, and social changes - comprising a considerable loss of control about the imperial influence on their countries. There was also a significant move of people during the 19th century, and a complex process of settlement and migration took place that changed the face of the British Empire. Through this, the empire suddenly found itself in the position to shape the future of the people within its borders, who were truly spread all over the globe. A key element of the British Empire had also been that it was not a "monolithic" one, but instead, one shaped by cooperation and making the economy abroad work for them instead of against them.

Throughout the historiographic debate, opinions on the British mission are widely scattered. Reaching from moral objections on the British intentions, to criticising the strategic approach to their territorial expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

The aim of this assignment is to answer and explore what first caused the British to feel superior in their political and economic ways, and how this led to a spirit of effectively wanting to “enlighten” indigenous people through their way of rule and establishing a civilising mission outside of their own borders.

The underlying question, to what extent the growth of the British Empire was influenced by the idea of a civilising mission, will be answered by considering various political and cultural facets, as well as examples, to facilitate an all-round view in order to come to a coherent answer.

Owed to the limited length of the examination, the information will be condensed as well as possible. At the same time limiting the topics, and only concerning the most important issues, while bringing critical parts of the discussion forward in mind.

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## **Analysis**

To review the starting position of Britain's rising empire, the relatively new unity with its neighbour states has to be considered, as it shows how the cooperation on the British Isles themselves has not been a given. The politically separated, individual states of England, Scotland and Wales first had to evolve into a united kingdom. First, England's conquest of Wales back in 1283, later a shared monarch between England and Scotland, due to the Union of Crowns in 1603. A process followed by England's arguably oldest colony, Ireland, formally joining the United Kingdom of Great Britain in 1801.

This constellation of states created a first sense of British colonialism, setting the scene for the rise of imperialism with its territorial expansion in and outside of Europe, in the following century. An ongoing demand grew, even from the nation's population, for the imperial expansion. This quite clearly indicated that this interest in colonising other territories was, as the historian Linda Colley fittingly describes, a ‘feeling of being united by the dominion over’ (Colley, 1992, p.325) the other countries they acquired. A statement in “The Cambridge history of the British Empire: 4” (1929, p.419) supports this by calling it a process fuelled by ‘nationalism’ and of course ‘self interest’. Motives that will later be addressed in more depth.

Thereby Britons, even with their individual differences ‘could feel united in dominion over, and in abstraction from, the millions of colonial subjects beyond their own boundaries’ (Colley, 1992, p.325). A feeling of superiority, distinctness and being special

compared to foreigners grew within the nation, one which is best described as 'Britishness' (Colley, 1992, p.325) and pride thereof.

This ultimately spurred a nationwide interest in introducing the indigenous population of the colonised territory to their own western values and their allegedly refined ways of living, thereby advancing their culture. A line of approach for an 'integral nation' (Metcalf, 1997, p.3) that worked well for a young empire in the making. Also, it proved to be the first indication of a "civilising mission", which was pushing Britain towards the cultural acquisition and assimilation of the territories their colonies conquered. In a quote of E. J. Hobsbawm, he made quite clear how this newly gained unity was able to support itself: 'There is no more effective way of bonding together the disparate sections of restless peoples than to unite them against outsiders.' (1990, p.91)

The Empire functioned as a common interest of the nation. It became evident how, for Britain, the 'territorial acquisition is not the end, but the beginning of imperialism' (Logan, 2010, p.11). This was crucial for the empire to thrive, and went hand in hand with the 'moral conception' (Eldridge, 1975, p.253) of Britain having to prepare its 'colonies for independence and autonomy in the modern world' (Logan, 2010, p.11).

There is also an ancient background to Britons and their civilising mission - namely Britain's own experience with being colonised and thereby civilised. A link to Caesar's invasions of Britain in 55 and 54 BC can be made. There is a certain similarity between the Roman's conquest of Britain, with a mission of civilising the 'barbarian' Britons through conquering them in two campaigns. An endeavour not too different to modern day Britain's actions in the era of the empire. Granted, the enormous area that Britain coated with their civilisation in this way, has been about ten times the size of the former Roman empire at its pinnacle.

On the other hand Metcalf (1997) describes this expansion as a process 'comparable to the conquest of Ireland' (p.3) in the time from 1529–1603. This was when Britons, for the first time, revealed themselves as something akin to the 'new Romans' (Metcalf, 1997, p.3), with the intent, or more so a feeling of obligation, to civilise, what to them seemed like 'backward people' (Metcalf, 1997, p.3). As Fischer-Tiné & Mann outline, in the initial phase the colonising missions could have been described as a 'moral and material progress' that functioned as an 'imperial ideology and doctrine' (2004, p.4). An endeavour that kept repeating itself in British history of expansion, lining out how it was shaped by a continuity of prior British rule in territories abroad. First from Ireland to America, and ultimately during the high time of colonialism from India to Africa.

Obviously these international colonial holdings of Britain revolutionised the global economy. They introduced the concept of land being claimed for the British crown, or privatised companies. These holdings were a key element of establishing an empire comprising a diverse array of people and thereby also their culture, leading to a 'vast interconnected world' (Daunton & Halpern, 2000, p.68). The settlers effectively were 'the agents of British civilisation', that 'took with them British tastes and values' (Johnson, 2002, p.59). Accordingly, the empire could have been described as an 'imperial state' (p.17), as Jackson (2013) put it. The mutuality between the connected colonies of the British Empire also caused the effect that Britain suddenly appeared as much part of the empire, as the empire appeared to be a part of Britain. Part of this uneven distribution of power had the side effect that the civilising mission automatically formed a massive social divide between the black and white populations within and outside of the colonies.

Another factor of Britain's ambition of establishing their rule throughout the world, was that in the time of the 19th century a substantial move of people through worldwide settlement and migration took place, opening up new strategies and possibilities for gaining imperial influence. It was highly debated how great the value gained through colonial migration and settlement actually was. The British social, cultural and moral presence did not, according to De Groot (2017), entail any strategic military plan. Which leads to the realisation how, with regard to defence, the civilising mission failed to sustain one of its underlying functions - the military advance of the empire. An act of expanding the empire, without actually expanding its military control in the process is quite adventurous for the formation of an internally stable empire. The term 'informal Empire' (Parsons, 1999, p.16) describes this ambivalent facet of the British rule. It stands for the execution of actions far beyond Britain's governmental control, whilst establishing ideals of British culture and forcing economic guidelines onto their colonies.

The introduction of western cultural and religious systems, the conversion to a different social organisation of an indigenous colony, certainly paved the way for further colonial exploitation through expansion. Here it is crucial to make clear the differences between settler colonialism and exploitation colonialism. For one thing, the colonialist approach to conquest is made with the initial intent of establishing a city or colony, that is to become part of the metropole, or possibly even a facsimile of it. On the other hand, in the exploitative approach to colonialism, native people were being used for labour, the natural resources found on their land were being exploited, and utilised for the export of raw material.

One of the core concerns of the British civilising mission was also the assistance of indigenous politicians in evolving their traditional governing strategy to one that was considered modern by British standards, and at the same time beneficial to the empire (Johnson, 2002, p.37). A slow but steady process of incorporating the guidelines of British rule. Implicating how non-white, native inhabitants would be able to overcome their incapability of self-governance and gain independence by following the guidance of the British, effectively leading them to civilisation (Cody, 1999). These factors of becoming self-sustained affected capital and commerce, defence and military, as well as industry and technology of the colonies that were ruled by the British. More precisely this shift was partly done through British officials spreading their homeland's ideals and establishing their governmental institutions as a way to modify the local culture of politics.

By the view of many contemporaries, using the example of India under British rule through the East India Company, it should first have reached a state of sufficient modernisation through British management, until it could 'contemplate' the shift to self-government. Additionally, a lack of education amongst India's native population, combined with the strong influence of their rulers on the political views of the people, made introducing a democratic system practically 'unworkable' (Johnson, 2002, p.37).

While it is often quoted that India and its enormous population, of some 200 million or even more in the 1850's, has been ruled solely by a few British civil servants, it often remains unmentioned how the Indian government 'employed about a million Indians to assist them in their enterprise' (Jackson, 2013, p.18). This effectively demonstrated a strong cooperation with the British Empire on the side of Indian rulers.

Obviously, the legitimacy of British rule during their quest of colonisation and implementation of the civilising mission had to be approved. As the expansion went on further, a need for a set of fundamental principles that legitimise the rightfulness of their rule became apparent. Staying put with the example of British rule in India, called the Raj in India, it took a Great Rebellion to bring attention to the importance of this. An organised uprising in India in 1857–58 against the rule of the British East India Company resulted in Britain's disposal of the Mughal, to be able to declare their monarch the sovereign ruler of India (Fischer-Tiné & Mann, 2004). This gave them an image of a victorious conquerer and thereby, for the Indian understanding of rightful rule, proving their status as successor to the Mughals and gaining widespread recognition as a sovereign ruling force over their territory.

There are various factors that allowed the British government to sustain predominance throughout their empire, thereby enabling them to persist on their civilising mission. One of them was the avoidance of unnecessary risks, such as repeating mistakes that, for example, previously led to the mutiny in India. They relied on 'cautious reform to avoid unrest' (Johnson, 2002, p.38) within the population, and to avoid an abandonment of imperialism as well. This was strongly characterised by a great fear of losing the great power that the rising empire gave them.

Additionally, the British applied a rather European way of proving their justification to rule over, and colonise, the native population. They claimed to improve and advance the lives of inferiors, establishing their own noble mission of civilisation spurred on by an obsession with ideas of what seemed appropriate and civilised by British standards. This was an act of sheer self-legitimisation.

Continuing with the example of India, the economic outcome of India's rule by the East India Company, defined by the doctrine of the civilising mission, included an expansion of the port cities, improved trade overseas and outward migration. Whilst, as described by Dodwell (1929), 'trade was a civilising agency' (p.352) for Britain. The economic impact also showed through the collapse of traditional industries, such as textile production and a slow transformation into an agricultural economy. Of course, the intent of this was to supply raw materials for the British world system. Outside of this, nationwide taxation was introduced, as by the view of British officials 'a peaceful population was a tax-paying population' (Rhoden, 2017).

Following up, even a cursory examination of modern-day India reveals that British influence is still quite substantial after their official withdrawal from India in 1947. After all, the governing of a country through one and a half centuries, with its repercussions and consequences, can not be wiped out overnight. One prime example being that the second official language of the Indian parliament remains English to this day (according to the Parliament of India). This was partly caused by the great varieties within the Hindi language, making communication in the parliament troublesome.

British ideas of a successful civilising mission also included the introduction of the concept of 'private property, liberty of the individual and education in western knowledge' (Metcalf, 1997, p.35) - with the latter being crucial, as it shaped the way future generations received the British rule and the ideals they conveyed. An impact on the educational system

classically proves to be an effective way of establishing rule over inferiors. At the same time this sustained the approval of the natives, and created a sense of justification for Britain's own civilising mission. This process became known as an Anglicisation of the education system, shaped by indigenous languages being replaced by those of the British colonists and a forceful imposition of British customs and culture.

The mission of schooling the indigenous population and thereby assimilating them educationally also proved to be an occasionally violent process. In colonies like New Zealand or Australia, children reaching school age were forcibly removed from their families, and placed in different locations, where imperial institutions had established an educational system for them (Simon, 2001).

The British government of the empire also introduced the indigenous population to a leadership for the native inhabitants established by so called "men on the spot". Plenty of individuals serving Britain, by painstakingly managing strategic and economic details, settling in, and colonising their allocated lands. Those officials, stationed on foreign lands, were surely convinced to be introducing the mission of civilisation through their orders from the British monarchs. Subsequently, the actual colonisation was only loosely controlled through Great Britain's government, with 'varying degrees of direct and indirect control' (Jackson, 2013, p.18). These "men on the spot", with examples being the Duke of Wellington, Warren Hastings or Robert Clive, were company men who ran institutions such as the East India Company. Such companies, introduced long lasting changes to the population whilst ensuing an extraction of profits to the benefit of Britain. Thereby the government, often established by "men on the spot", suddenly wielded almost absolute power over the Indian subcontinent. They were convinced that the population of they were in charge had to be ruled tyrannically and through fear. Britain started a spread of racial hierarchies and stereotypes, based on their idea of being 'a governing race' (Jackson, 2013, p.15), a strategy that shaped despotism and orientalism. The intent of these British projects, construed as a civilising mission, was generally 'securing profit' and 'forwarding interests [of the British principals]' (Jackson, 2013, p.8/9).

Nevertheless, through the exploitative acquisition of foreign land, and growing of force over people, Britain also gained plenty of one-sided profits. They successfully acquired 'exclusive mercantile access' to the land they captured and its natural resources, ranging from 'fish and furs to tobacco and timber' (British Library, 2016). One of the most gravely required resources was plain people power, in order to support Britain's military position.

To answer one part of the central question, of what pushed forward the success and interest in a civilising mission, we can refer to Rob Johnson's remarks. Firstly a powerful bound of military states provides protection of the United Kingdom and its own colonial interests, and acts as a repellent to hostile states through its strategic threat. Secondly, the United Kingdom was able to represent itself as a force with which it was unwise, or dangerous, not to cooperate with or be a part of. As a third factor, they utilised the wish 'to acquire [the] benefits of a valuable land revenue system' (Johnson, 2002, p.36), thereby giving them greater chances to invest in the land they now owned.

On the other hand, according to historian David Cannadine, the execution of a civilising mission did not prove to be simple, especially because of the British struggling to comprehend the culture and beliefs of the diverse colonies over which they gained power. Instead, their initial approach to colonisation was quite 'ad-hoc' (Jackson, 2013, p.19), with a sustainable strategic plan for handling the colonies still in the making during early imperial rule in the late 19th century. This resulted in them simply starting off by introducing 'what they knew' (Cannadine, 2002, p.4) best - the social norms of their own country of Britain. This also included domestication of the native population (Cannadine, 2002, p.19). The British Empire, with its 'mass of territories' (Jackson, 2013, p.18), indeed valued a sense of 'familiarity and the domestic', but the 'different and exotic' (Cannadine, 2002, p.19) just as much. This included a process of trying to comprehend and make sense of the exotic, thereby pushing forward what has been described as the 'construction of affinities' on the presumption, that 'society on the periphery was the same as, or even on occasion superior to, society in the metropolis' (Cannadine, 2002, p.19). Britain effectively created overseas satellites of their own country.

From a religious, missionary perspective, the government of the British Empire soon found a sort of 'moral conception' (Eldridge, 1975, p.253) for their civilising mission, justifying its cause, and spurred on by 'humanitarian, as well as religious interest' (Dodwell, 1929, p.159). To the British, the introduction of moral principles like an abolition of slavery and an anglicisation of the educational system in indigenous territories felt like an obligatory act of modernisation. This was especially because of the general 'strong faith in missionary work' (Johnson, 2002, p.36) within the British population and government during this time. This was also referred to as "The White Man's Burden", an idiom originating in a 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling. Its interpretation proposes, how Britons felt something like an obvious need to rule over non-white people, conveying a sense of despotism and enlightenment, originating from their supposedly benevolent empire. This was an act influenced by

western colonialism, which quite clearly demonstrated how much of the civilising mission effectively encouraged the thrive to culturally hold the upper hand. Of course, this did not directly lead to an expansion of the empire, yet it was a big part the concealed message within their mission: exploitation through colonisation with its professed positive intents of cultural progress. Settler states were changed by these intentions, some causing adverse consequences within their countries. Influence requested by the British monarchs could soon be found all over the world, established through their companies that settled in all kinds of regions, such as New Zealand and Australia, America and Canada, Asia, Southern Rhodesia and of course Africa - all greatly shaped by the British Empire. Thinking back, the concept of the civilising mission proved to be very important in our understanding of the British Empire, as it was a powerful tool to support the imperialistic strategy of the government.

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## Conclusions

*“Take up the White Man's burden-  
No tawdry rule of kings,  
But toil of serf and sweeper-  
The tale of common things.”*  
(Kipling, 1899)

As Kipling satirically points out, the civilising mission and its positive effect on expansion was strongly caused by the sheer conviction behind its implementation. This showed through constructed affinities and the motivation to keep a social predominance throughout the empire. Through the debated incentives of the British civilising mission, two things can be noted in order to answer the question of how much British expansion was pushed forward through the idea of spreading civilisation.

Firstly, the self-justification of Britain's own imperial and expansionist actions was one of the civilising mission's most important functions. It addressed how it did not only convey a doctrine of “noble intentions” in a very media-effective way within the empire, but it also demonstrated the superiority over “inferiors” which to them appeared to be helpless and politically confused. To the Britons it seemed like a “British enlightenment” was what these “inferiors” needed, as to them the conquered countries were just waiting to be reconstructed by the civilisation of the whites, effectively modernising them.

Secondly, the civilising mission was merely a functional instrument in order to further possible exploitation of people power and resources within the colonies. This was a

reckless territorial acquisition through the establishment of self-governing satellite states and an anglicisation of education within them, which created a dependency and protection for trade with the British. This was vital for surveilling the global economic system and securing financial gains. Ultimately, this reliance was beneficial for Britain in order to sustain its temporarily undefeated power of rule.

Throughout the research of this range of topics it became clear how a strong cultural ideology was an important part of the British imperial progress, and how self-legitimation and the strategic exploitation of conquered regions was certainly a prime function that the pretence of the civilising mission fulfilled. Through this, the British made themselves known for a 'pioneering role in spreading civilisation and progress' (Wende, 2016, p.344) due to their strategy of expansion. Hereby, the British also left a century-long legacy of their political culture in the countries they had colonised, which has lasting consequences to this day.

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