

EMPIRE

Like the BBC series that it accompanies, this poster looks at Britain's empire and its legacy. Below are two maps. The first depicts Empire at its height in the 1920s; the second, the modern Commonwealth of Nations that evolved out of Empire.

Highways of Empire was the first poster issued by the Empire Marketing Board after its creation in May 1926. It was displayed in January 1927 on massive billboards, 20 feet across by 10 feet high. But why did a power that spanned a quarter of the globe need to exhort people to 'buy Empire'? Despite other countries increasing tariffs on British exports, Britain had failed to establish 'Empire preference'. A 1923 imperial conference suggested Britain should charge tariffs on imports while exempting Empire produce. But this might raise food prices, and the issue contributed to Conservative losses in the 1923 elections.

The Empire Marketing Board When the Conservatives came to power in October 1924, they wanted to boost Empire trade without antagonising consumers and free traders. Their solution was the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), with its committees

for research, marketing, and publicity. To appease home producers, it also publicised British produce. It portrayed the Empire as a family, with the housewife building Empire through her shopping choices. The EMB was dissolved after the Great Depression saw Britain agree, at the 1932 Empire Economic Conference in Ottawa, that it would implement Imperial Preference.

EMB publicity The EMB also provided films, menus, shop window bills, materials for clubs, and reduced-size, mass-produced posters that the public could buy for 1s 6d. By 1933, 27,000 schools were on its distribution list, the majority in England and Wales. The poster subcommittee chair, Frank Pick, had marketed the underground and buses, commissioning MacDonald Gill to design the popular 1913 *Wunderground* tube map. Its whimsical speech bubbles and rhymes sold travel as an adventure. Pick selected Gill for

'Highways', dictating a semicircular projection to suit its size. Gill placed Britain at the centre, and let loose his artistry and playfulness. He even misplaced polar bears in the Antarctic, with a speech bubble that asks: 'Why are we here?'

How should we read the poster? Empire is depicted as the very model of modernity, with global transport creating one system of trade. Routes are shown, with ships and even an aircraft. The latter anticipates the first Imperial Airways services to Empire, which started in January 1927. However, the poster also evokes nostalgia and tradition. Its sea monsters, stars and *anemoi* (Greek gods of the winds) echo early charts. These, and quotations of Shakespeare and Pope, ensure that it simultaneously suggests that the British Empire is unified and modernising, and yet deeply rooted in British culture and history.



BUY EMPIRE GOODS FROM HOME AND OVERSEAS

ISSUED BY THE EMPIRE MARKETING BOARD

PRINTED FOR HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE BY JORDISON & CO LTD LONDON & MIDDLESBROUGH

Red is used to colour all Empire territories on the 'Highways of Empire' poster. But this disguises the existence of very different types of colony and influence.

Dominions Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Newfoundland (1907–49) and South Africa were all settlement colonies. By 1931 these, together with Ireland, were acknowledged as 'Dominions' with full self-government and autonomy in foreign affairs.

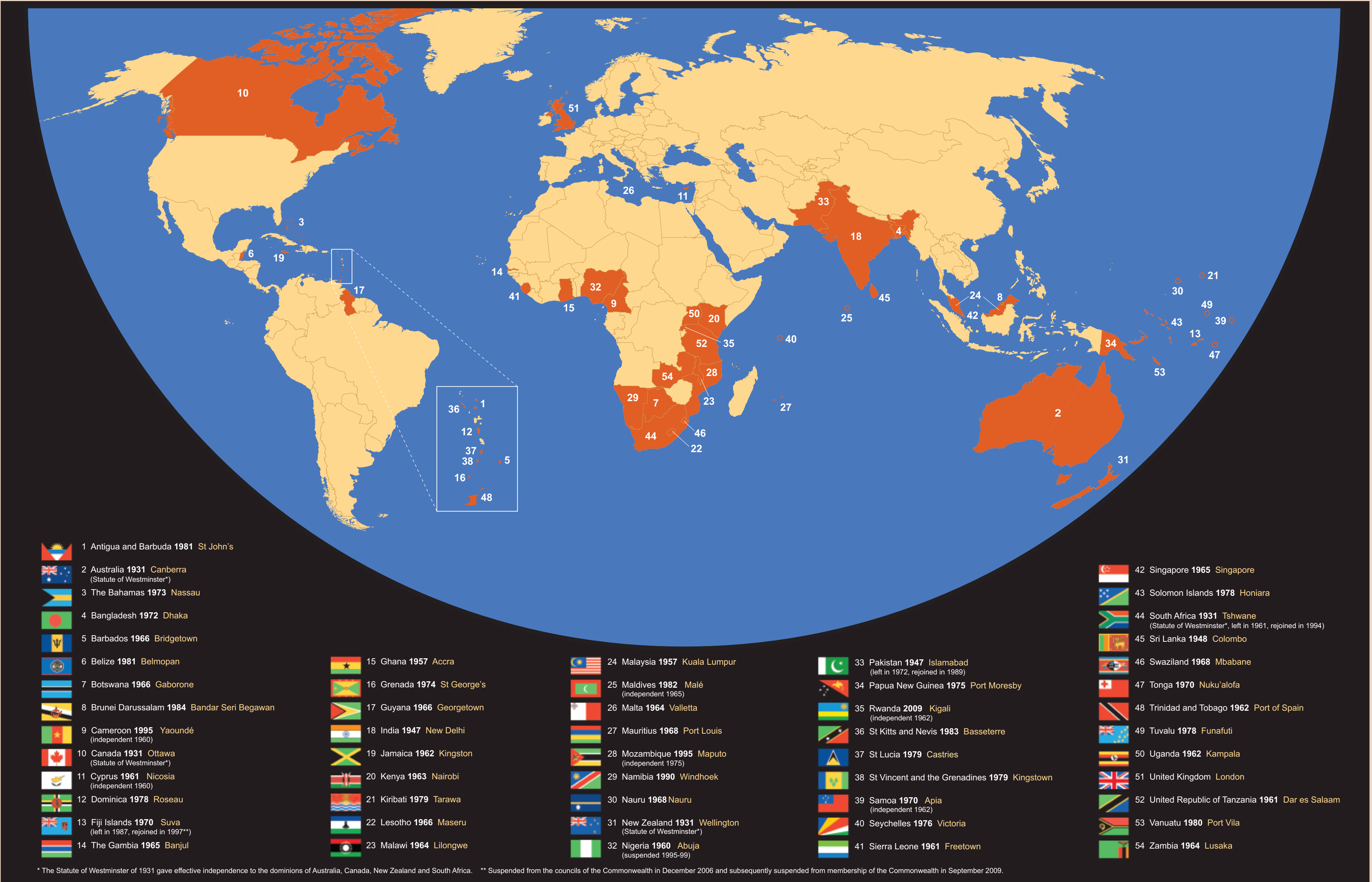
Colonies In many tropical possessions, indigenous peoples were ruled by a white colonial governor, who appointed an advisory and legislative council. In some outlying districts, white rule was represented by a single white District Officer and a handful of police, or was devolved to local elites in what was known as 'indirect rule'.

India was an empire in itself. Its population (338 million in 1931, nearly 400 million ten years later) exceeded that of the French Empire (86 million in 1936). In 1941, the Indian province of Bengal (60 million) was more populous than the UK (48 million). India contained semi-autonomous princely states, and directly-ruled British Indian provinces.

Enclaves Speckled across the globe were tiny dots or enclaves such as Gibraltar – entrepôts, strategic ports, and coaling stations – where a thin crust of British officials ruled over soldiers, sailors, immigrants and traders.

Protectorates Some areas of the globe were not shaded red, but were under British influence. Oman and many Gulf States, for instance, were 'protectorates', their rulers having accepted British protection, and British guidance in foreign policy.

'Highways of Empire', by Gill MacDonald, 1927, © The National Archives (TNA) C0956/537A



Modern Commonwealth maps emphasise the individuality and equality of its 54 constituent states, which contain around two billion people or 30 per cent of the world's population. What they do not reveal is that the Commonwealth is both more, and less, than the sum of previous British colonies.

New Zealand was one of the original Dominions, and is one of the members that retain the British monarch as Head of State. The Queen is represented by the Governor-General, who performs the same constitutional, ceremonial and community-related roles in New Zealand as the Queen does in the United Kingdom.

Canada is also an original Dominion that still recognises the Queen as its Head of State. But in recognition of the French-speakers of Quebec and Ontario, it is also a member of the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*, which was founded in 1970.

Myanmar (Burma before 1989) became independent on 4 January 1948. Along with Hong Kong, it is one of several dependencies that never joined the Commonwealth. Others include Iraq, Transjordan, Sudan, and protectorates such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Other countries joined only to withdraw, notably Ireland in 1949, South Africa (following other members' objections to apartheid) from 1961–94, and Zimbabwe in 2003. Members can be suspended for contravening Commonwealth values.

Rwanda (which had been under Belgian control before independence in 1962) became the Commonwealth's 54th member in November 2009. Along with Mozambique (an ex-Portuguese colony, joined 1995), it is one of just two members not to be an ex-British dependency. In both cases the lack of historic ties was mitigated by strong connections with Commonwealth neighbours.

This map is adapted from an original produced by the Commonwealth Secretariat for Commonwealth Day 9 March 2009

The modern Commonwealth

This map is adapted from those issued by the modern Commonwealth Secretariat. Britain appears tiny and almost peripheral. The emphasis is on the 54 equal members of the Commonwealth, and their distinct flags and identities. This reflects the way the Empire was rebranded – after post-war decolonisation – as a voluntary, equal association.

How did the modern Commonwealth evolve? Its taproots lie in the emergence of self-government in settler colonies after 1867. By 1931, six Dominions were recognised by the Statute of Westminster as sovereign, equal states owing allegiance to the crown, and freely associated 'as Members of the British Commonwealth of Nations'. Meetings of the British and Dominions' leaders were held from time to time. By 1929 there was debate in Britain about whether, and if so when, India might also become a full Dominion.

The modern Commonwealth dates from 1949. India and Pakistan became independent on 15 August 1947. All colonies and Dominions recognised the British monarch as their head of state. But India wanted to become a republic. Consequently the London Declaration of 1949 stated that King George VI was now the symbolic Head of the Commonwealth (dropping the word 'British'), and need not be each member's sovereign. India duly became a republic while remaining in the Commonwealth. By 2011, just the UK and 15 other members recognised the Queen as their head of state.

What does the modern Commonwealth do? It is an inter-governmental organisation, taking decisions on the basis of consensus. There are two-yearly meetings of heads of state, a secretary-general, and a secretariat in London. Its values include support for democracy, but perhaps its most significant work is the Secretariat's support for smaller countries. It offers them space in buildings in New York and Geneva (facilitating

diplomatic and trade representation). It supports youth work, education, governance, human development and rights, and democracy and consensus building.

The Commonwealth family includes a range of institutions and events. Perhaps the most famous is the Commonwealth Games, but there is also the Commonwealth Foundation, and Commonwealth organisations for youth, business, and war graves. Empire has also left a legacy of shared knowledge of the English language, games such as cricket, and British-style legal systems.

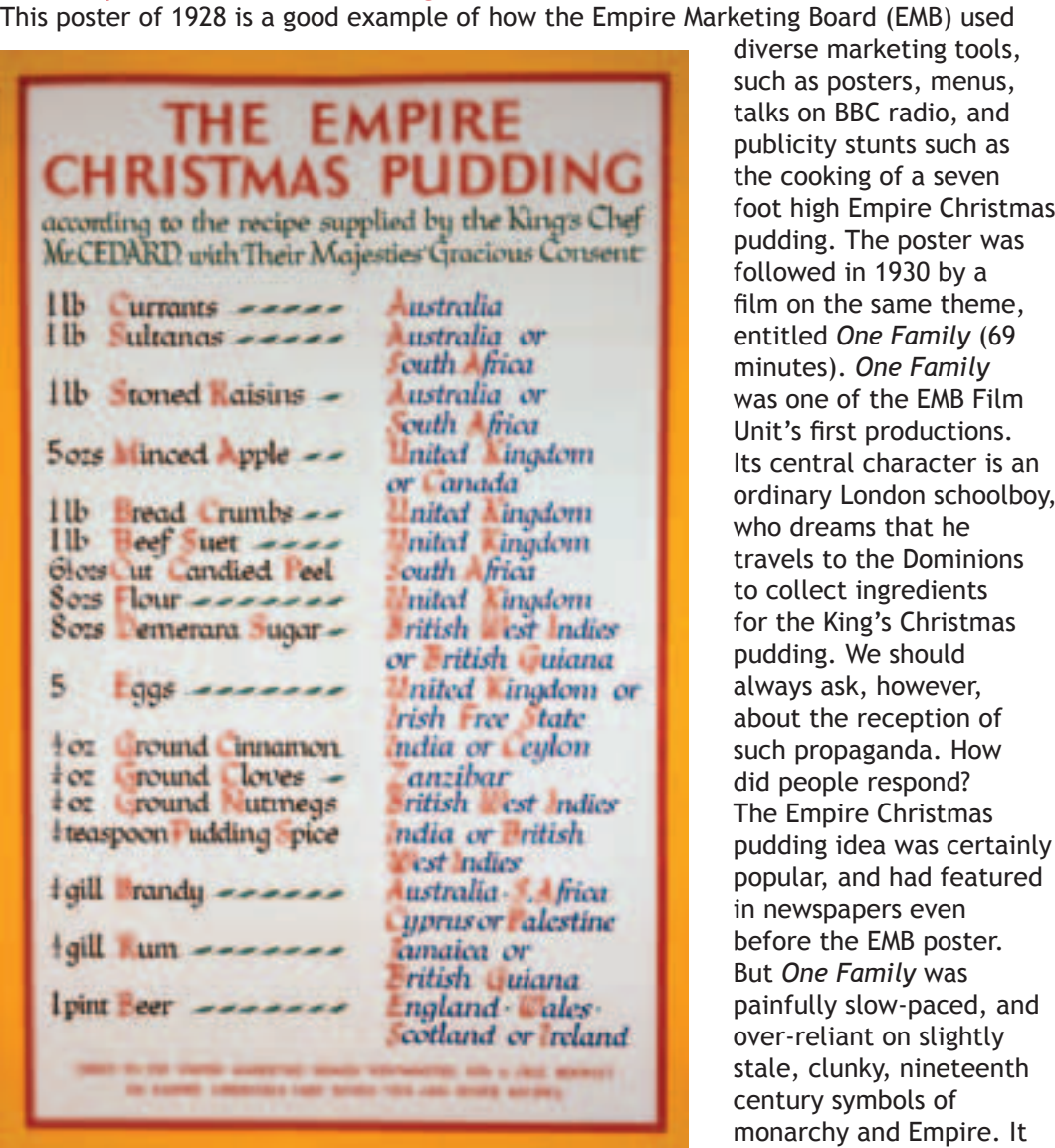
www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/empire



SELLING EMPIRE

The maps overleaf are examples of attempts to ‘rebrand’ Empire (and the Commonwealth that followed it). We now look in a little more depth at the marketing of Empire and its place in British culture.

The Empire Christmas Pudding



‘The Empire Christmas Pudding’, by F.C. Harrison; 25 ins x 40 ins, displayed November–December 1928; Roberts and Lete Ltd, London; EMB ref A02; © The National Archives (TNA) C0956/63

how far did they influence hard-pressed shoppers to choose on criteria other than price and quality?

Maps as propaganda

The EMB posters and two maps overleaf evoke the idea of an empire ‘on which the sun never set’, whose legacy lived on in the Commonwealth long after the decolonisation of the 1940–60s. But these maps, and other images of Empire travel and geography such as the EMB film *One Family*, are of course more than mere reflections of reality. They are tools of marketing and propaganda. ‘Highways of Empire’ was part of the EMB’s attempt to rebrand Empire as a co-operative, mutually beneficial economic enterprise rather than as primarily a jingoistic military entity. EMB officials well understood that, for some people in the UK, the word ‘Empire’ had negative connotations. By contrast, the Commonwealth Secretariat maps emphasise the individuality and equality of its members, eschewing any sense of British priority or centrality. In recent years, there has been an attempt to emphasise and re-energise the Commonwealth as a ‘values-driven’ organisation, committed to supporting democracy, good governance and other core characteristics amongst its members.

Reading the gaps

Maps, like any text, are also interesting for what they exclude: for the ‘gaps’ they leave. Hence ‘Highways of Empire’ simply colours most imperial territories red, glossing over the vastly different intensities of settlement and degrees of British control. It also displays trade routes very selectively. By showing mainly links from Britain to each of its colonies, it creates an exaggerated sense of Britain’s centrality, and hides the degree to which most British trade went outside of Empire, notably to the United States and Europe.



‘Colombo Ceylon’, by Kenneth D. Shoemith; 60 x 40 ins, displayed December 1928; Waterlow and Sons Ltd, London; from the ‘Our Trade with the East’ series of posters; EMB ref AD1; © The National Archives (TNA) C0956/13

The Song of Ceylon

The EMB also commissioned Basil Wright’s award-winning lyrical documentary, *Song of Ceylon*, in response to a request by the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board (completed 1934, 40 minutes, ultimately issued by the GPO Film Unit). This depicted an ancient Sinhalese and Buddhist culture enduring alongside British colonialism, and evoked a dramatic sense of place, rather than trying to hammer home overt messages. It also juxtaposed the use of traditional, laborious production methods with the Empire’s modern ships, stock markets, and telegraph system. Hence it showed lines of tea pickers and men



‘Lancashire Cotton Goods for India’, by Keith Henderson, displayed 1930; ref 1935.583; © Manchester City Galleries

How far was British culture ‘imperial’?

The maps, and EMB posters, raise a wider question. Some authors point to the overwhelming number of books, articles, advertisements, songs, imperialistic school textbooks and cigarette cards, and argue that by the late nineteenth century British culture was saturated with imperialism. But Porter (2004) counters that for many newspapers and journals, references to Empire were outweighed by references to non-Empire countries. Empire only seems to loom large if you selectively filter imperial references from their context. Was the very need for the EMB to market Empire a sign that most people did not, before the 1920s, ‘think Empire’ when buying? There are, therefore, questions about which groups (the military, missionaries, the public school-using middle classes, and families of emigrants) were Empire enthusiasts, and which were critical of, or largely ignorant about, Empire.



‘Egyptian Court’ North Transept of the Crystal Palace’, from Matthew Digby Wyatt’s ‘Views of the Crystal Palace and Park’, 1854; © National Media Museum/SPL

This poster shows exhibits, first displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851, that did showcase Empire, but gave even more space to the UK and foreign countries. Egypt did not see British intervention until 1882. The image is from Matthew Digby Wyatt’s ‘Views of the Crystal Palace and Park’, showing the Egyptian Court in the Crystal Palace after it was reconstructed at Sydenham in south-east London, in 1854.

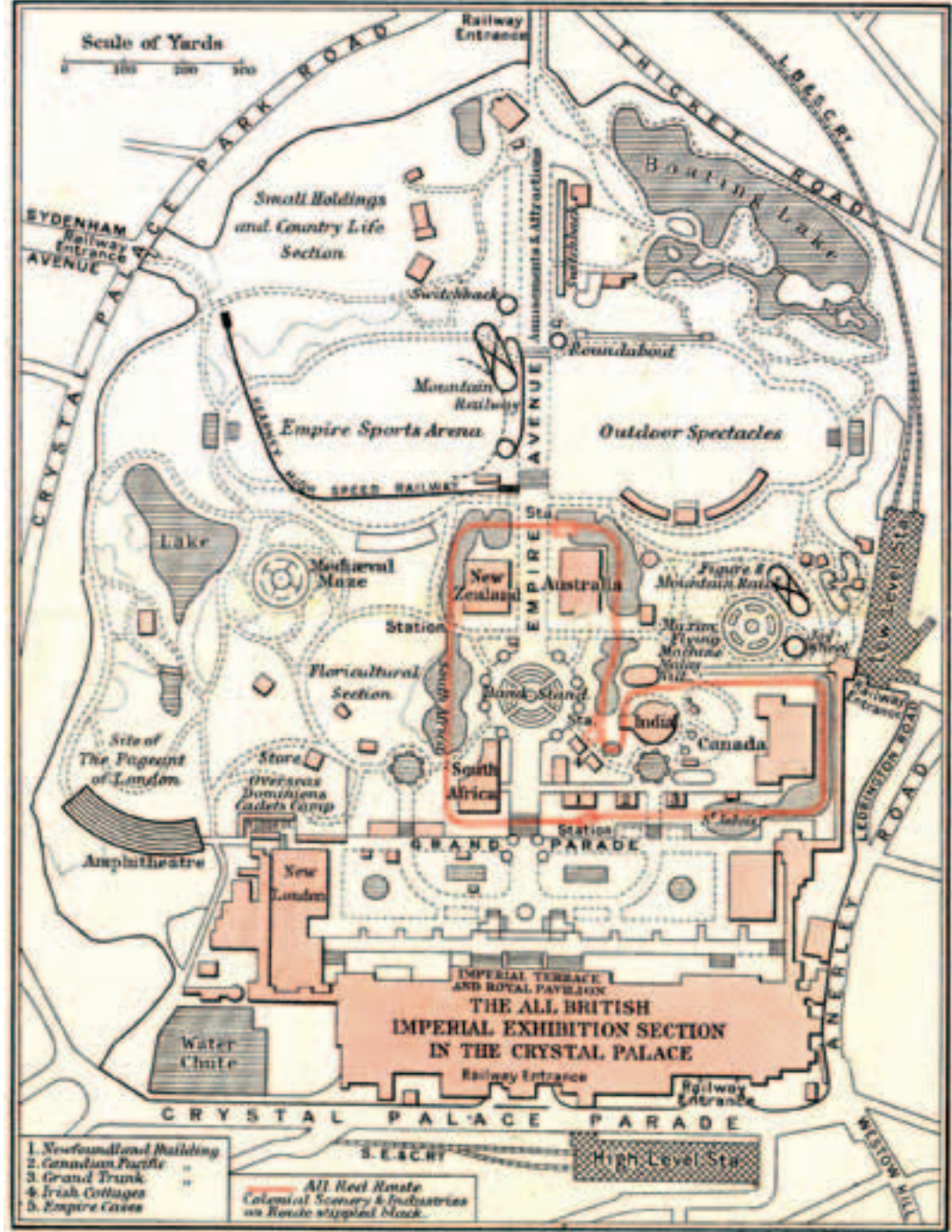
Exhibitions as barometers of Empire feeling

We can also confuse a preoccupation with Britain’s global position with concern for Empire. For many people, the Empire was just one aspect of Britain’s global power and its position as a hub for global trade and services. We can see how this worked with the massively popular exhibitions held in London between 1851 and 1925. The Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace showed Empire products alongside equally prominent British, European and foreign displays. It was not until 1886 that Empire



‘Festival of Empire’, 1911; © Library of Congress

clearly took centre-stage in an exhibition. By the 1911 Festival of Empire, Empire had become the main spectacle. In 1911 you could view colonial produce arranged in scale models of the Dominions’ Houses of Parliaments (as in the postcard shown here), as well as in a Malay village, and an Indian ‘jungle’ with animals running free. You could even take an ‘All Red’ Empire train between them, and past an ‘Indian tea plantation’. It seems as if Britain was looking more to Empire as its manufacturing lead eroded and its naval pre-eminence ebbed away. Hence Empire’s centrality peaked in the Wembley Empire Exhibition of 1924–5. A staggering 27 million visitors attended. You could walk round a street of Chinese shops (representing Hong Kong), or a white walled Arab building (for East Africa). The Australian pavilion sold tons of apples, and Canada’s featured a life-size, refrigerated butter sculpture of the Prince of Wales and his horse in 1924, and one of him in the dress of a Native American Chief in 1925. With the majority of emigrants now going to Empire countries – not the United States as in the nineteenth century – the 1920–30s was, perhaps, the heyday of the British Empire. It was certainly the peak of the ‘idea’ of Empire as something valuable, coherent, vast, and able to support British world power at a time when it was under threat.



‘Festival of Empire and Imperial Exhibition 1911 held at the Crystal Palace’; image supplied by Sydenham Town Forum

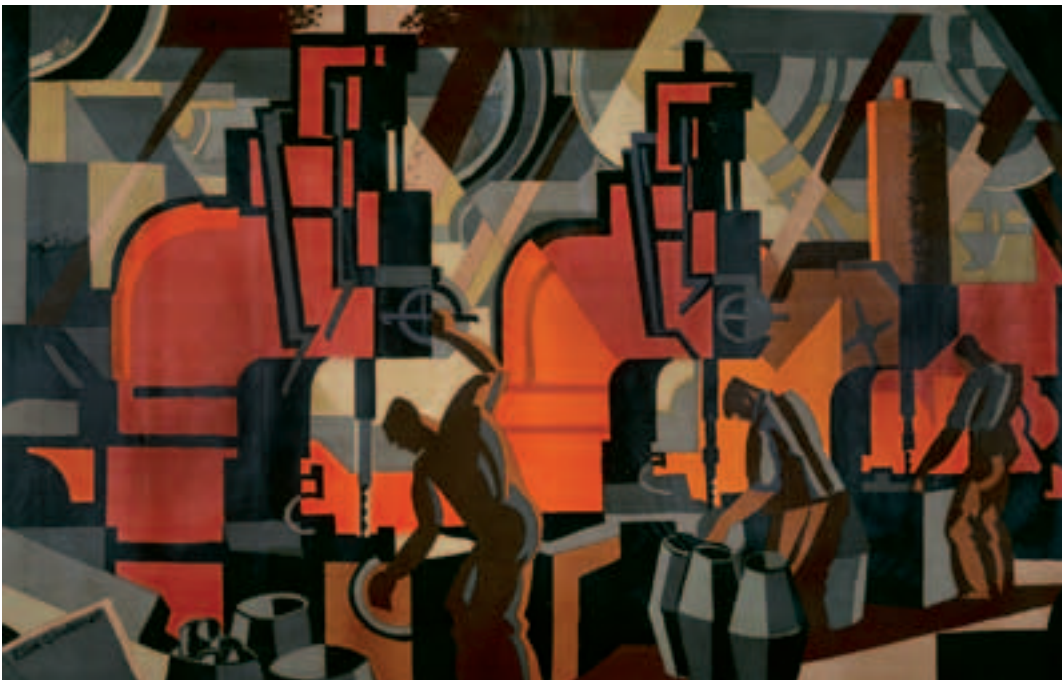
Which British Empire?

The later exhibitions in effect provided 3-D ‘maps’, or Empire as virtual reality, in which you could appear to wander around the buildings of the Empire. But this raises an additional question. Which British Empire were you walking round? Which British Empire do you see if you look at maps produced between 1884 and the 1930s? The exhibitions people visited then, and the maps of Empire we tend to see now, are overwhelmingly those of the post-1884 British Empire, which really did bestride much of the globe. Yet a map of Empire before 1850 would show little British presence in Africa, bar the southern tip and some coastal enclaves. A map of Empire for 1750 would show only a handful of colonial possessions, and an empire that was more maritime than territorial in nature. There would be virtually nothing in Africa, and nothing at all in Australia. Even in India, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta would appear as specks clinging to the edge of the sub-continent. Instead, the main focus would be on the ‘Atlantic World’ of the American colonies, Caribbean and West African coast: a world underpinned by slaves working on plantations. Half a dozen empires, including those of the Mughals, China, Spain and even Portugal, then outstripped the British Empire. In short, the map of the British Empire most people carry in their head represents only the last 80 years or so of its existence.

The Empire Marketing Board and art

‘Highways of Empire’ and the modern Commonwealth map are both forms of marketing but look very different. The modern map is relatively unadorned, while ‘Highways’ uses jokes and images of winds, ships and animals. This reflects the EMB’s determination to educate by entertaining – engaging the imagination – and to commission many of the best artists of the day.

We have already seen how the EMB Film Unit, between 1928–33, helped to develop what was later called the British documentary tradition. Film makers such as Basil Wright and John Grierson (Assistant Films Officer in the EMB, and who coined the term ‘documentary’ in 1926) were sometimes given the freedom to move beyond mere description, as in *One Family* (1930), *Song of Ceylon*, and Grierson’s silent documentary *Drifters* (1929). Inspired by American and Soviet realist films, the latter employed realism, showing authentic workers on the British herring fleets as types, rather than using professional actors. The documentary is sometimes credited as a defining moment in the development of British documentaries.



‘Motor Manufacturing’, by Clive Gardiner, from the ‘Empire Buying Makes Busy Factories’ series of posters; 60 x 40 ins, displayed September 1928; Waterlow and Sons Ltd; EMB ref C1; © The National Archives (TNA) C0956/258

The poster subcommittee, meanwhile, tried to employ the best poster artists, in what was arguably a golden age of artist-produced British posters. Hence MacDonald Gill was employed on the strength of his previous Underground map and other transport posters. Artists used to depicting bucolic English landscapes for railway posters were commissioned, and depicted both British and Dominion pastoral landscapes in soft shades.

Even when portraying Britain, though, many different artists and styles were employed. Clive Gardiner’s set of posters for ‘Empire Buying Makes Busy Factories’ (many EMB posters were produced and displayed in sets of five) were starkly modernist and partly abstracted. His work is sometimes described as having elements of Cubism and Futurism.

Any attempt to claim that EMB posters adopt particular styles to emphasise British superiority are, therefore, suspect. Whether for Britain, Dominions or colonies, the styles employed are as varied as the artists commissioned. The emphasis was on moving hearts and minds by using works of the highest aesthetic quality to touch people’s imaginations. That said, certain broad themes and absences can be discerned in the posters.

The Empire Marketing Board and settlement colonies



‘Canadian Lumbermen’, by Frank Newbould, from the ‘The Empire is Still Building’ series of posters; 60 x 40 ins; displayed September–October 1930; © The National Archives (TNA) C0956/223

When ‘Highways of Empire’ appeared in January 1927, *The Manchester Guardian* noted that it ‘proved so attractive as to cause congestion along the highways of London.’ (*The Manchester Guardian*, 1 January 1927). But *The Guardian* also noted that, ‘This is Imperialism without the tears’. Hence images of the Dominions never included indigenous inhabitants. Instead, landscapes are shown as wilderness to be tamed by white men, as vast tracts of land transformed into pasture for cattle and sheep, or as rows of crops ready to be exported to Britain. The emphasis was also on the Dominions as producers of commodities and consumers of British products. Hence the underlying EMB line that buying Empire created British jobs. Yet the reality was, for instance, that Australian aboriginals had lost almost all the most fertile land and were widely discriminated against until well into the 1960s and 1970s.

Colonial development

If the Dominions and India were some of Britain’s best customers, many other African and Asian colonies were relatively underdeveloped. If the EMB image was of ‘one family’, then a hierarchy emerges, in which Britain is the parent, the Dominions grown children in relations of interdependency, and other colonies younger, adopted children in need of education. Though many posters depict non-Europeans in much more flattering light than those above right – some attempting a sympathetic realism – they are almost always shown working, often under a European supervisory gaze, and occasionally with exaggerated or exoticised features. Very few of the artists were from the colonies depicted, and many had not visited them. The fact that much of the best land had often been reserved for Europeans – as in Kenya – is something the posters naturally do not hint at.

The broader context for the ‘development’ theme was that there had been incipient labour unrest and nationalism in African, Caribbean and Asian colonies in the 1920s. The 1920 Colonial Development Act (CDA) set up a small Colonial Development Fund. In 1949, the CDA was succeeded by the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (CDWA), which included development of social services. So hope of improving the colonies’ trade combined with need to counter growing restlessness, and forestall international criticism.



‘East African Transport Old Style’, by Adrian Allinson, from the ‘Colonial Progress Brings Home Prosperity’ series of posters; 60 x 40 ins, displayed December 1930–January 1931; Waterlow and Sons Ltd; EMB ref BR1; © The National Archives (TNA) C0956/211



‘East African Transport New Style’, by Adrian Allinson, from the ‘Colonial Progress Brings Home Prosperity’ series of posters; 60 x 40 ins, displayed December 1930–January 1931; Waterlow and Sons Ltd; EMB ref BR5; © The National Archives (TNA) C0956/215

Epilogue: the end of heroism?

Prejudices and assumptions from the heyday of Empire died a slow death as Britain became more multicultural, from the 1950s. The era of unselfconsciously ‘heroic’ representations of Empire – whether through military heroes or economic and social development – drew to a close in the late 1960s. Decolonisation was by then rampant. Britain left Aden ignominiously in 1967, and announced a timetable for withdrawal of all forces from ‘East of Suez’.

The values once lauded were now mercilessly – if slightly affectionately – mocked. *Carry On Up the Khyber* was released in 1968, spoofing recent Empire films of the ripping yarns variety, such as *Zulu* (1964), and *Khartoum* (1966), the old juvenile literature’s ‘heroic’ virtues of restraint, decorum, self-sacrifice for King and Empire, and class values. A year later George MacDonald Fraser’s Flashman – the imperial antihero who everyone mistakenly lauds – made his first appearance in the eponymous novels. Drummed out of Rugby at the end of Thomas Hughes’ *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, the womanising, bullying, cowardly Flashman is part comman, part Richard Burton (the nineteenth century explorer who feigned Muslim disguise to take the pilgrimage to Mecca, and translated the *Karma Sutra*). He dissembles his way across Empire conflicts from the 1842 retreat from Kabul, to Rorke’s Drift in 1879, exhibiting reverse qualities of the teenage heroes of a G. A. Henty novel, or of a H. Rider Haggard story. Both Flashman’s first adventure, and *Carry On Up the Khyber*, touched on Afghanistan and Britain’s tendency to stumble there into humiliation and loss. Both mocked what had once been core values of British imperialism.



The Khasi of Kalabar (played by Kenneth Williams) and Bungdit Din (played by Bernard Presslaw); from ‘Carry On Up the Khyber’ (1968); © ITV/Rex Features



Sgt. Major Macnutt (played by Terry Scott), and the Third Foot and Mouth Regiment; from ‘Carry On Up the Khyber’ (1968); © ITV/Rex Features

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The arts past and present (AA100), allow you to discover where your interests lie, while building more advanced skills.

Making sense of the arts (Y180)

This short, Openings programme course introduces some of the key ideas and ways of thinking involved in studying the arts and humanities. You will explore poetry, history and art, at the same time as developing a range of study skills. Themes covered in this course include popular protest and the history of the demand for democracy in Britain from around 1815.

The arts past and present (AA100)

This broadly-focused first-level course covers a wide range of subject areas, including: history, art history, philosophy, classical studies, history of science, religious studies, music and English. It is structured around four themes, guiding you through some of the basic concerns of arts subjects: reputations; tradition and dissent; cultural encounters; and place and leisure. Your studies will range from poetry and short stories to string quartets and sculpture, and across a wide variety of cultures and historical periods.

Voices and texts (A150)

Designed to follow *The arts past and present* (AA100) this focuses on language

in a wide range of contexts, and from the perspective of different academic subjects, including: classical studies; history; literature; music; religious studies; creative writing; and English language studies.

Exploring history: medieval to modern 1400-1900 (A200)

This second-level course provides a wide-ranging introduction to historical study and will teach you the techniques of professional historians. It covers: 15th century France, Burgundy and England during the Hundred Years’ War; the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century; the civil wars of the British Isles in the 17th century; slavery and serfdom in the Atlantic world in the 18th and 19th centuries; the development of nation states in western Europe following the French Revolution; and European imperialism in Africa.

Understanding global heritage (AD281)

What is the nature and value of heritage? Why are certain objects, places and practices considered more worthy of protection than others? This second-level course will introduce you to the study of heritage and its function at local, regional, national and global levels. Using case material from around the world you will explore the global scope of heritage,

from the ways in which local communities use heritage to build their own sense of identity, to the ways in which the state employs heritage in nation building.

Medicine and society in Europe, 1500-1930 (A218)

In today’s society, the growth of medical technologies, costs of treatment and provision of medical care have become increasingly controversial issues that affect everybody’s life. History can provide a valuable perspective from which to make sense of today’s challenges. This second-level course traces developments in medicine – and its social, political, economic and religious contexts – from the Renaissance to the early 20th century.

Empire: 1492-1975 (A326)

Empires have had a remarkable impact on world history over the last five centuries. The history and significance of the British Empire is a thread running throughout this third-level course, but you will also encounter the empires of France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, China and Russia. This comparative perspective will enable you to think analytically about how empires begin, are ruled, are experienced by groups as varied as slaves and settlers, and why and how they decline and fall.

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EMPIRE

