

The British Empire & the Commonwealth of Nations

1 Before you read

- a) Explain what an 'empire' is.
- b) Collect words and phrases you might find in a text about an empire.

"Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule¹ the waves!"

This old song, which was first performed in 1740, is still sung every year on the last night of the famous 'Proms' concerts in London. Every time the refrain starts, the whole audience joins in. The words they sing are a reminder of Britain's past as a sea power², and of the reason why a small island nation was able to build a great empire around the world.

After John Cabot had crossed the Atlantic from England in 1497, other explorers continued to look for new lands during the following century. This often meant trouble with Britain's neighbours in Europe who also wanted more territory and trade. Spain was very powerful and already had an empire in the Americas, but the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 at the time of Elizabeth I gave Britain the chance and the confidence to develop her own influence in different continents.

The New World played a big role in the early years of Britain's empire. In 1607 English settlers



The last night of the Proms

founded Virginia, the first of thirteen permanent colonies along the east coast of North America. Caribbean³ islands like Bermuda, the Bahamas and Barbados were also taken by Britain during the 1600s, although Spain was still strong in this region and France held territory, too, so that there was often conflict between the three countries. Fighting between Britain and France also broke out regularly in what is now Canada, and this continued until the end of the Seven Years' War in Europe in 1763. In that war Britain and France were on opposite sides, as usual, and when Britain and her allies⁴ won, France had to give Britain most of her land in North America.

Meanwhile⁵, the British had been building up their influence in Asia. In 1600 the East India Company was formed to develop trade in Southeast Asia and India. After rivalry⁶ with the Dutch had led to the massacre of British merchants⁷ in the Spice⁸ Islands in 1623, the Company concentrated on India, and by the end of that century had important trading stations around the coast. As in North America, however,



A member of the ruling class in British India and an Indian servant, ca. 1910

¹to rule ['ru:l] herrschen • ²(sea) power ['si:pəʊə] a country which is very strong at sea, with many ships • ³Caribbean [ˌkæriˈbi:ən] • ⁴ally ['ælaɪ] sb who is for you, not against you • ⁵meanwhile [ˌmi:n'waɪl] inzwischen • ⁶rivalry ['raɪvli] competition • ⁷merchant ['mɜ:tʃnt] Kaufmann • ⁸spice [spais] Spices give food more flavour.

France was a big rival, and both countries tried to win influence through military support for Indian leaders who were fighting their own wars against each other. Once again, the Seven Years' War in Europe helped to give an advantage to the British. Bengal, in the northeast of India, came under the control of the East India Company in 1757, and then other areas followed. It was actually this company that ruled India until the British government finally took over officially in 1858.

Even losing the American colonies when they decided to fight for their independence in 1776 could not stop Britain's power growing around the world. Exploration of the Pacific region by sailors like James Cook led to the huge new colony of Australia in 1788, New Zealand in 1840, and many other smaller territories.

At the same time, Africa also offered possibilities. Like the Portuguese, the Dutch and the French, the British had already been involved in trade in West Africa for centuries, but the only permanent European settlement was the Dutch colony at the Cape of Good Hope. In 1806 the Cape was taken from the Dutch by the British, and then later in the 19th century missionaries, explorers and

merchants like David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley and Cecil Rhodes helped to open the way north into the centre of the continent. The British were not alone in the hurry to grab land in Africa. Other countries like Portugal, France and Germany had the same idea. In the end, however, the big winner was Britain, and by the early part of the 20th century Britain ruled over a quarter of the world and had the largest empire in history. The British Empire became known as 'the empire on which the sun never sets'⁹.



British soldiers in South Africa at the time of the Boer Wars in the late 19th & early 20th centuries

2 Collecting the facts

- Who or what helped Britain to build an empire? What problems were there?
- Design a time line that shows how the British Empire grew in different parts of the world.
- Find out and tell the class a few facts about one of the people that are mentioned in the text.

Different perspectives

What motivated Britain to create a huge empire? Was it the wish for international power and prestige, or the need¹⁰ for greater trade during a period of history when the population was growing fast and industrialization was taking place? Empire and trade were certainly closely connected. Colonies provided¹¹ raw materials to make goods¹² and markets where goods could be sold, so British companies supported the development of the Empire, sometimes very actively. The East India Company showed how economic influence could be turned into political power, and Cecil Rhodes followed this example when he founded the British South Africa



Company in 1889. He already owned diamond and gold mines in South Africa, but his big dream was to create British colonies all through that continent, and his new company allowed him to use his wealth to try and do this.

⁹to set [set] here: to go down • ¹⁰need [ni:d] When sb has a need for sth, he/she has to have it. • ¹¹to provide [ˌpre'vaɪd] to give • ¹²goods [ɡʊdz] finished products to be sold



A symbol of British colonial power: the spectacular celebrations for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee

Today such views and actions would not be accepted, but at that time the critical voices in British society were still in the minority. Most people saw the British Empire as a great triumph. Queen Victoria's Diamond¹³ Jubilee¹⁴ in 1897 was celebrated with a big parade of soldiers from British territories in all parts of the world. The nation felt proud. There was also a view that the mother country had a duty to teach British values to the indigenous populations. For some people this idea came from a feeling that Britain's high status was part of God's plan for the world. Others used Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which had been presented in 1859, as an argument that white people were more developed and so had the right to rule over everyone else.

3 Thinking about the topic

- a) Compare and contrast the view of the British Empire in the past from the different perspectives of Britain and the colonies. Why would such an empire not be accepted today?
- b) Imagine someone from Britain today could travel back in time and talk to a proud Briton in the year 1897. Use your ideas from a) to develop a dialogue.

From Empire to Commonwealth

Even while the British Empire was still growing there were signs of the beginning of the end. As early as 1867, Canada became a Dominion¹⁷, with the right to most aspects of self-government. Then at the Imperial¹⁸ Conferences of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, other colonies with a mainly white population were also allowed to take their first steps towards ruling themselves. One after

Unfortunately for the colonies, however, British rule was not always a reason to celebrate. 115

Land and raw materials were used to Britain's advantage, and the indigenous people were often treated very badly. One of the worst aspects of the early part of the Empire was the trade in slaves¹⁵. 120
During the 17th and 18th centuries millions of Africans were taken by force, transported to the Caribbean and America, and sold for work in the fields there.

Although other countries were also involved, this trade was dominated by British ships and markets until it was stopped across the Empire in 1807.

Even where there was no slavery, there was usually little or no respect for the indigenous people and their traditions. In most colonies they were seen as the natural servants of their white rulers, while in Australia many Aboriginals were even hunted¹⁶ and killed like animals. In those days racist views were normal for most white people, and many lives and cultures were destroyed when the British tried to force their way of life on other parts of the world. 145



Announcement for a slave auction in the United States, not long after independence from Britain 140

another, Australia (1901), New Zealand (1907) and South Africa (1910) won dominion status. This meant a different kind of relationship with Britain, and so in 1931 a new organization was created. In this 'Commonwealth of Nations' the mother country and her dominions all had equal¹⁹ status and they all accepted the British monarch as head of the Commonwealth. 160

¹³diamond [ˈdaɪəmənd] *Diamant* • ¹⁴Diamond Jubilee [ˈdaɪəmənd ˈdʒuːbɪliː] *60-jähriges Jubiläum* • ¹⁵slave [sleɪv] sb who is forced to do work and not paid for it • ¹⁶to hunt [hʌnt] to chase • ¹⁷dominion [dəˈmɪnjən] a relatively independent territory in the British Empire • ¹⁸imperial [ɪmˈpiəriəl] the adjective form of 'empire' • ¹⁹equal [ˈiːkwəl] the same



The official side of the Commonwealth: a group portrait at a 'Heads of Commonwealth' conference

Naturally, when people in non-white colonies
 165 saw how the Dominions finally won full
 independence, they wanted to do the same. The
 pressure for self-government developed in many
 British territories, although in the end it was the
 Second World War that helped to speed up the
 170 break-up of the Empire.

Britain promised to give independence to
 India in exchange for support during the war.
 Then, when the war was over, there was no longer
 the money or the will to keep and defend²⁰ a
 175 big empire around the world. India became
 independent in 1947, and over the next twenty
 years almost all the other colonies followed.
 Free at last, these new states joined the
 Commonwealth because they understood
 180 the advantages of keeping links and working
 with each other. The Commonwealth has no
 constitution²¹, but the heads of government meet
 every two years to discuss important international
 subjects. Of course they do not always agree.
 185 South Africa even left the Commonwealth for
 almost thirty years because the other members
 criticized its racist system. This huge group of
 over fifty very different nations has always tried to
 stay close, however. There are many programmes

to bring people together in areas like business,
 education, health, the environment and culture,
 and every four years athletes from member
 countries take part in the Commonwealth Games.

The Commonwealth is an important legacy²²
 of the British Empire, but it is not the only one.
 195 Although many people did not experience
 freedom and equal rights themselves during
 British rule, they learnt about these ideas and
 values from the British religion, Protestantism.
 When they were finally allowed to have their own
 200 governments, they often chose a British style of
 democracy and used the British legal, financial



The everyday side of the Commonwealth: students from all over the Commonwealth coming to London to study

and education systems as models. English also
 survived as a common²³ language for people with
 different mother tongues, and is still an official
 205 language in many Commonwealth countries
 today.

For good or for bad²⁴, the British Empire has
 left its mark across the world. History moves on,
 however, and today the former²⁵ colonies have
 210 found their own roles in the world, while Britain
 is no longer so powerful. Now the British look
 towards their partners in the European Union –
 although sometimes still with one eye on the past.

4 Understanding the situation today

- Explain how the British Empire developed into the Commonwealth.
- In what ways is British influence still felt in different parts of the world?
- Choose one Commonwealth country, do research on it (where it is, history, people, climate etc.) and give a short presentation in class.

TIP

The Commonwealth website can give you information about all the member countries.

²⁰to defend [dɪ'fend] to protect • ²¹constitution [ˌkɒnstɪ'tjuːʃn] Verfassung • ²²legacy ['legəsi] what a person/thing is remembered for after he/she/it is gone • ²³common ['kɒmən] gemeinsam • ²⁴For good or for bad ... [fɔ 'gʊd/bəd] Positiv oder negativ gesehen, ... • ²⁵former ['fɔ:mə] ehemalig

Lösungen/Lösungsvorschläge

1

- a) An empire is a large group of territories that are all controlled by one country. (You can also talk about a 'business empire' when one person or company controls many different businesses.)
- b) *Examples using vocabulary already known to the students:* to build/create an empire • to found a colony • to take land/territory • army • war • to dominate • empress • superpower • to control/be controlled by another country • continent • different parts of the world • strong • to fight for freedom • to win independence • to treat well/badly • (no) democracy • indigenous people • ...

2

- a)
- Sea power helped Britain to build an empire. British ships explored different parts of the world. In many places land was taken and colonies were founded. In other places British influence was developed through trade or military support. Sometimes missionaries also played a role.
 - There was often trouble with other European countries that wanted more territory and trade, especially France. Another problem was losing the American colonies when they fought for their independence in 1776. British sea power was still the strongest in the world, however, and so the empire continued to grow.

b) Individuelle Antworten

- c) *Notes as basis for statements (other facts also possible):*
- **John Cabot** (1450-?): born in Italy as Giovanni Caboto – sailor and merchant – 1483 moved to Bristol, England – 1497 sailed northwest to look for new way to get to Asia – landed in North America and thought it was Asia – called it 'New-found-land' – 1498 started second journey – no information about him after that
 - **Elizabeth I** (1533–1603): came to throne 1558 when older sister Mary died – Mary Catholic but Elizabeth Protestant – developed Church of England – popular monarch – never married – made England rich and strong – sent ships to New World –

1588 defeated Spanish Armada – golden age for poets like Shakespeare

- **James Cook** (1728–1779): farmer's son – joined Royal Navy – learned to make maps in North America – 1769 chosen as captain of ship *Endeavour* – sent to look for southern continent – 1770 discovered east coast of Australia – 1772 sailed south again and visited New Zealand – 1776 started third journey – killed in Hawaii
- **David Livingstone** (1813–1873): Scottish missionary doctor – 1841 sent to southern Africa – wanted to tell more people about God – went deeper into continent – followed the Zambezi river – the first European to cross continent – became explorer for rest of life – centre and east of Africa – also spoke against slavery
- **Henry Morton Stanley** (1841–1904): born in Wales – 1859 moved to America – became journalist – sent by *New York Herald* to Africa to find explorer Livingstone – reports made him famous – became explorer himself – described long journey in *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) – helped to develop Congo region
- **Cecil Rhodes** (1853–1902): moved from England to South Africa for health reasons – developed diamond and gold mines – very rich – used wealth to help British Empire – 1890 became prime minister of Cape Colony – worked to create more colonies e. g. Rhodesia – founded Rhodes Scholarships at Oxford University

3

- a)
- British people in the past thought their huge empire was wonderful. They felt proud because their country was powerful and had a high status in the world. They believed British values were the best. In their opinion learning these values would help other people in the Empire to develop and improve.
 - People in the colonies had a different perspective. For them the British Empire meant having no rights in their own country. Their land was used to create wealth for Britain and they themselves were often treated badly. They did not have white skin, so the British had no respect for them and their traditions.

– Such an empire would not be accepted today because now we believe everybody should be free and every country should be allowed to have its own government. In the modern world we understand that there are different lifestyles in different parts of the world and that these cultures are important. We should respect/celebrate them.

b) *The dialogue could start like this:*

Modern Briton: Wow! What a lot of people! What's this big parade you're all watching?

1897 Briton: It's the parade for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, of course! Look at all those soldiers from all round the world! Isn't it great to be British? We've got the biggest empire in history!

Modern Briton: Hm. I don't feel very proud. We don't have the right to dominate other countries and people.

1897 Briton: I don't agree. God has made us powerful so that we can ...

4

a) In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Britain allowed Empire territories with a white population to start ruling themselves. They were not colonies any more but they still had links with Britain, and so in 1931 the Commonwealth of Nations was created. In this new organization Britain and her old colonies all had the same status. When the non-white colonies finally won their independence in the years after the Second World War, they also joined the Commonwealth. So while the Empire got smaller the Commonwealth got bigger.

b) style of democracy • legal, financial and education systems • the English language

c) *Individuelle Antworten*