

Reforms

social reform

The use of slave labour in British colonies was the first point of attack. They used slaves in North America since the seventeenth century.

African slaves were sold to British slave traders in West African ports.

They were transported across the Atlantic and sold in the West Indies or North America at auction.

The injustice of slavery was under attack by the late-eighteenth century.

Humanitarian reformers, church missionary societies, and radical writers formed an effective anti-slavery pressure group, led by William Wilberforce.

Thanks to this pressure, the British government introduced several measures designed to end the slave trade.

In 1807 the slave trade by British citizens in Africa was made illegal.

In 1811 the movement of slaves on the high seas was made an offence in maritime law.

In 1819 a register of all existing slaves was drawn up so that any illegal additions could be traced.

Support for the Anti-Slavery Society grew.

The major opponents of abolition were the slave owners (sugar merchants and plantation owners). They demanded substantial compensation to the tune of 30 million.

In August 1834 the Abolition of Slavery Act became law. It stipulated that all slaves under six years of age should be freed immediately. The rest were to remain part-slave, part-free until 1838.

The news was not greeted with satisfaction everywhere.

The Boers (independent Dutchmen) in Cape Colony were outraged at the decision and refused to accept it.

Many of them left the Cape in search of land that was outside of British control.

By 1860 the independent Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal had been established.

British historians claim that the pressure-group activities of the anti-slavery movement created a climate of opinion in British government circles which led to abolition.

West Indian historians have countered by showing that economic self-interest played its part as well. While in the eighteenth century West Indian sugar was a one-way ticket to prosperity, it was fighting a losing battle against foreign competition by the early years of the nineteenth century.

The compensation offered by the British government gave the slave owners an easy way out from a difficult situation.

This difference of opinion between British and West Indian historians seems unlikely to be resolved. The historians of the imperialist power tended to portray the actions of their country in the best possible light.

Historians of ex-colonies claimed that this evidence does not tell the whole story and that it distorts the underlying economic context in which abolition occurred.

This trend among historians of the ex-colonies to question the assumptions of older British historians has become known as «the Empire striking back».

Political reform

Between 1815 and 1870 a far reaching reform took place in the political organisation of the Empire: the development of self-government for the colonies of settlement.

The starting point was an armed rebellion in Canada in 1837.

The main cause of the rebellion was the arbitrary rule of the British Governor and permanent officials who ignored the wishes of locally elected councils for greater democracy.

The rebellion was easily put down by British troops. Lord Durham was sent to investigate the causes of the rebellion.

The Durham Report placed the blame on the British administration. Durham recommended uniting Upper and Lower Canada to form a single province with a representative system of government.

The Durham Report became the blueprint for the introduction of self-government to most of other colonies of settlement.

Upper and Lower Canada were united in 1840.

By 1867 Canada was a self-government colony with a democratic voting system and its own domestic policy.

By the mid-Victorian period the British government was prepared to grant responsible self-government to all «politically advanced colonies», that is, colonies with British and European populations. If a colony was poor with a large non European population then it did not qualify.

Self-government was confined to the «white colonies».

These self-government colonies were a unique new development in the history of the Empire. Yet it was the British government which masterminded it.

Economic reform

The British economy had been developing impressively in the late eighteenth century. In the period 1815-1860 Britain was responsible for 60 per cent of the total growth of world manufacturing. In 1850 Britain accounted for 50 per cent of world trade in coal, cotton and iron. The British population grew up, railways transformed internal transport.

The steamship and the telegraph transformed the worldwide communications. A new international banking and finance system based in London spread around the world.

Industrialisation influenced groups outside parliament to fight for political and economic reform. Yet change came slowly, due to the dominance of the landed aristocracy over the British political system.

Extra-parliamentary pressure became the primary means of influencing the government to implement reform.

There were 3 main sources of extra-parliamentary pressure to introduce free trade:

- 1) The Anti-Corn Law League (political voice of Manchester free-trade radicalism).
- 2) Some free-trade economists (Adam Smith, James Mill).
- 3) Bankers and financiers in the City.

The ideas of all three groups penetrated government economic policy.

In the 1820s, William Huskisson, President of the Board of Trade, allowed foreign countries to trade with colonies, lowered duties on imports and relaxed shipping regulations to allow foreign ships into British and colonial ports.

The free trade budgets of 1842 and 1845 reduced duties on a wide range of imported goods.

In 1846 the protective tariff on imported corn was abolished.

In 1849 the Navigation Acts, which gave Britain the monopoly of the transport of goods to the colonies, were repealed.

The free-trade budgets of Gladstone in the 1850s and 1860s removed all the remaining tariffs on imported goods.

The triumph of the free-trade ideas meant the death of the Old Colonial system.

Free trade ended the commercial monopoly of Britain over her colonial markets.

The colonies of the dependent empire were mainly losers from the free trade revolution, most of all India.

India was denied self-government, so it could not impose a protective tariff to save its own domestic industry from British imports.

On the other hand, the settlement colonies were winners from the introduction of free trade. The granting of self-government allowed them to impose protective tariffs on British goods to sell their own goods in the tariff-free British market.