

# Background

## From Empire to Commonwealth

the South Pacific on the principle that the British formed a group of leaders within administration and trade, i.e. an élite, but the native peoples were usually allowed to carry on their traditional social organization. These new colonies were occupied for a number of reasons. Some for commercial purposes, e.g. many of the African colonies, Ceylon and last but not least India, which was to become the cornerstone of the Second Empire. Other colonies were acquired to form the strategic bases for the Royal Navy mainly to secure the long communication-lines of the Empire. This applies to e.g. the Mediterranean territories such as Malta and Gibraltar as well as Singapore.

Despite the many types of territories dependant on Britain, Ireland always had a special status within the British Empire. Already in the 12th century the first Britons had settled on Irish soil thus creating Protestant enclaves in a country of Catholics. Over the centuries, Ireland developed into a country of permanent tension with deep hatred against the British because of their suppression and impoverishment of the Catholic Irishmen. Ireland remained under British rule until 1949. (See "Northern Ireland" in the series *Views on Britain*).

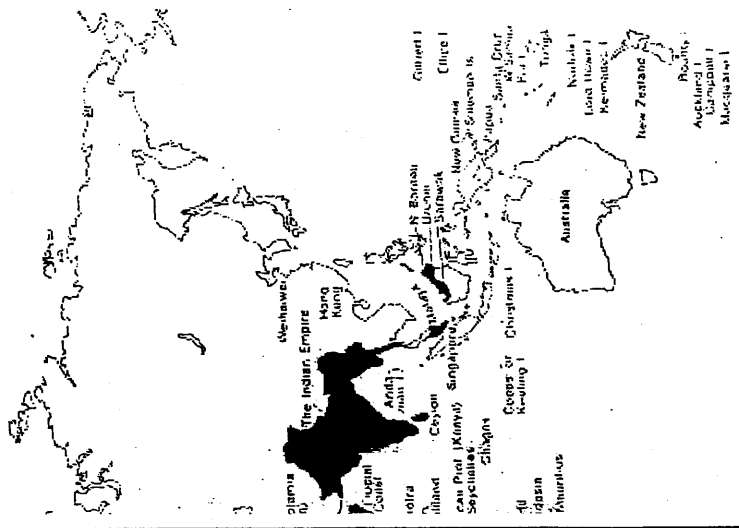
At the beginning of the 20th century Britain had created an effective Empire which could not be threatened by any of her competitors such as France or Spain. Britain was the industrial and commercial centre of the Empire and although she had had to fight several wars to gain or retain her colonies, there was strong support in Britain of her colonial policies. A particular élite was educated to run the col-

For centuries Britain was a colonial power. It acquired territories in all corners of the earth, colonies of different categories and for different purposes. In its heyday, during the 1930s, the British Empire comprised a quarter of the world's population. It was, indeed, an Empire on which 'the sun never set'.

The early colonies of settlement, often referred to as the *First Empire*, were founded from the beginning of the 17th century. By this time there was in Britain a growing interest in exploration and in the expansion of trade resulting in the British settlement of North America and the West Indies within the first decades of the 17th century. Later, such territories as Canada, South Africa and New Zealand were colonized by the British, who introduced British culture thereby suppressing the original culture and population with the consequence that the original tribes were more or less wiped out and within a few generations these areas became white nations. Most of these territories were later, from the middle of the 19th century, to gain virtual self-government.

One important exception from this development was the case of the 13 colonies in North America, which became independent in 1783 after having fought the War of Independence with Britain. After the loss of the North American colonies, which had formed the economic basis of the Empire, Britain had to turn to other territories. So, throughout the 19th century, a new kind of empire was eventually created.

The *Second Empire* was established in Asia, Africa and



**The British Empire 1913**

- The British Empire, as controlled from London
- Territories newly won in the 19th century
- Self-governing dominions of the British Empire

Why did the British Empire dissolve so suddenly, within a period of about 30 years after having lasted for 300 years? Well, there was no single cause, but a number of factors influenced the course of events. Britain was weakened after the Second World War and was facing rapidly increasing expenditures to maintain her Empire. Britain also faced a growing hostility to imperialism in world opinion as well as keen competition from the USA to be the leading power in the Western World after the Second World War. One of the most important factors was, however, a new development in many of the colonies: a strong wish to become independent. This process developed like a chain-reaction. Once India had achieved independence, it became self-evident for a number of colonies to obtain the same status. As the markets in the colonies had gradually lost importance to Britain's declining industry, Britain consented more or less willingly, and generally it turned out to be a peaceful process of decolonization.

What exactly is the *Commonwealth*? It is a voluntary association of independent sovereign states, all former colonies of the British Empire. Its functions are not very concrete, there are no common political aims, social structures or common policies in foreign affairs, but all countries accept the Queen of England as their head, and Britain still accepts certain obligations towards the member-countries such as financial aid.

The past history of the Empire can still be traced in British society today, particularly as regards the influx of coloured immigrants and the complex situation in Ulster. Many immigrants have had to face situations in which they have met with hostility or, at best, indifference, a fact which has made them realize that their view of Britain as their motherland was an illusion. They were unwanted in Britain. So, although Britain no longer has her Empire, she certainly has to deal with the aftermath of colonialism.

ones and many British families were living in distant parts of the world. There was a feeling of self-confidence and trust in the future.

India was considered to be the most precious of the colonies. Since the beginning of the 17th century India had gradually become dominated by the British, first through the East India Company and from 1858 under direct British rule. It was the economic foundation of the Second Empire and consequently it created a particular element of uncertainty in the British view of the future of the Empire when India gained independence in 1947 as the first of the non-white colonies. This event was the culmination of a long process of liberation led by Mahatma Gandhi.

The status of self-government which had gradually developed in the old colonies of settlement (later to be called the *Dominions*) was legally formulated as an Act of Parliament in 1931 in the Statute of Westminster, which described Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa as 'autonomous communities within the British Empire'. This was the origin of the Commonwealth.

After the Second World War it became evident that a new phase of the development of the British Empire had begun. The Dominions were practically independent, and when India gained independence in 1947 and became a member of the Commonwealth, it was a tremendous encouragement to other colonies that wanted to break away from the Empire. The loss of India caused a reconsideration of imperial policies in Britain, and eventually the process of *decolonization* began. In 1957 the first African colony became independent, but particularly during the 1960s this process speeded up, so that between 1957 and 1966 21 countries with 120 million inhabitants had gained independence. Today, most of the former British territories are members of the Commonwealth with a total population of over 1,000 million people, a quarter of the world's population.