

The British Empire The claim that the sun never set on the British Empire was not an empty boast. By the end of the nineteenth century the Empire included nearly a quarter of the earth's land surface and more than a quarter of its population.

This imperial endeavour began with the foundation of the first English colony in America in 1607 and ended when British India became independent and was partitioned into Pakistan and India in 1947.

The thirteen American colonies, the so-called First Empire, were lost in the War of American Independence (1775-83).

Commercial expansionism and the acquisition of new territories were the motives for the creation of the Second Empire, which reached its zenith in the 19th century when Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1877. By then Burma, Ceylon and much of the West Indies had already been brought under British sovereignty and the Antipodes - Australia and New Zealand - had been colonized by British settlers. In 1867 Canada became the Empire's first self-governing dominion.

In the late 19th century, during Queen Victoria's reign, the Empire builders turned their attention to the 'dark continent' of Africa, although trade settlements had already existed in Gambia and on the Gold Coast for three centuries and the interior had already been penetrated by explorers and missionaries. In addition to the Union of South Africa, granted dominion status in 1910, many African Crown Colonies and protectorates were established and settled by British farmers.

Since granting these countries their independence in the 1950s and 1960s, Britain has retained only few vestiges of imperial power: dependencies of the Crown such as Bermuda, Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands etc. The transformation of the British Empire into the Commonwealth began with the Statute of Westminster (1931), which refers to a free association of self-governing countries equal in rank and united by a common allegiance to the Crown.

The Commonwealth The terms Commonwealth or Commonwealth of Nations refer to a voluntary association of 50 independent states with a combined population of some 1,200 million (nearly a quarter of the world's total). In the course of decolonization between 1947 and 1972 many former colonies emerged as new nations in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean. On attaining independence, most decided to join the Commonwealth, though some countries have since left for various reasons.

The main characteristic of the Commonwealth is its diversity. It includes a whole continent (Australia), large countries like Canada and India and small islands such as Antigua and Barbados.

Distributed over all continents, it is multi-racial, with a wide range of cultures, languages, nationalities and faiths. Most members, apart from some exceptions like Singapore and the 'White Commonwealth' (the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), belong to the Third World. Queen Elizabeth II is recognized by the inhabitants of Commonwealth countries as head of the Commonwealth.

The relationships between members are based on economic co-operation, their main link. Since 1962 Britain has given financial aid (low-interest loans) especially to Third-World members to promote their industrial and agricultural production. Britain also fostered Commonwealth trade by means of preferential tariffs on imports, but its economic interest has shifted to European markets since it joined the European Community (now the European Union) in 1973. In consequence, some Commonwealth countries have meanwhile become associate members of the EU with reduced- duty access to EU markets. (source:)

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