



Universidad de Oviedo

# Perfidious Albion: a Humble Contribution to the English Black Legend

Trabajo de fin de grado en Estudios Ingleses

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Curso 2021/2022

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## 1. Introduction

Why am I writing this degree project in English? How did the English language become the *lingua franca*, the global language? My hypothesis, after completing four years of English studies, is the following: sadly, because the English people, due to their perfidy, cruelty, ambition and lack of scruples were capable of imposing themselves – and their culture and language – upon all the other nations in the world, including Spain. In this paper I will attempt to explain how the English could achieve this impressive outcome, and I will do so from two different perspectives: the relationship between Spain and England and the efficiency of English propaganda.

### 1.1. On “Perfidious Albion”

According to modern dictionaries, “perfidious” means “faithless”, “disloyal” or “treacherous”. On the other hand, Albion is the name given to the British Isles by the ancient Romans. The complete expression exists in most European languages to refer to Great Britain. Although its invention is often attributed to the French around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and Napoleon is considered to have promoted its use, its origins date several centuries back (Schmidt, 1953: 604-16).

### 1.2. On the expression “Black Legend”

Until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the term “legend” was commonly used in several European languages to refer to an account of lives of saints (from Latin “legenda”: that must be read). Later on, after John Foxe published his *Acta et Monumenta* in 1563, the concept began to be used by Protestants to refer to the fictitious, invented lives of Catholic saints, as opposed to the veridical lives of Protestant saints (Roca, 2016:13). From then on, the term acquired its contemporary sense of “exaggerated or unreliable account of some actually or possibly historical person” (Oxford English Dictionary). The expression *Leyenda Negra*, coined in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by Spanish authors such as Emilia Pardo Bazán and Julián Juderías, is commonly used to refer to the atrocities committed by Spaniards during the Spanish Empire. Since this black legend has been fuelled for centuries mostly by English propaganda, I think it is only fair to apply now the term conversely to reflect upon the blackest spots of English – and British – history.

### 1.3. The ancient history of Britain

Apparently, what we now call the British Isles were occupied in the Neolithic (5,000-4,000BC), among other tribes, by Iberians <sup>(1)</sup>. In time, these islands would be attacked and conquered by different peoples, such as Romans, Germanic peoples, Vikings, and Normans, all of them contributing to the making of a nation composed of great warriors, great sailors, great pirates. And great advertisers.

## 2. The beginnings of propaganda in English history: William I and the Bayeux Tapestry

One of the first known artifacts of English propaganda is the Bayeux Tapestry, dated around 1077, which basically justifies William the Conqueror's accession to the English throne as devised by God.



Plate 1: The Bayeux Tapestry (detail)

The tapestry depicts, through images accompanied by Latin inscriptions, one of the most decisive events in English history: the conquest of Anglo-Saxon (or Anglo-Danish) England by the Normans. Divided in several sections and scenes, it starts with the events leading to the invasion of England by William, Duke of Normandy, and it ends with his crowning as King of England. The presentation technique has been compared with modern moviemaking: the tapestry was designed to be exposed hanging on the walls of some great building such as a cathedral, where some educated person, acting as a guide,

would explain the scenes to illiterate people in a circular tour, with the final scene ending the show placed close to the first one.

Almost one thousand years old now, the Bayeux Tapestry is a fascinating historic and artistic document which reveals amazing skills, the greatest of which is not embroidering, but balancing (or juggling) religious faith, economic interests and political stability. If the goal of the minds and hands behind it was to legitimise Norman England, they succeeded in doing it, although their method was only a complement to the brutality and terror displayed throughout his reign by the Christian king chosen by God.

Indeed, the real story behind this sophisticated historical document is a merciless policy called “consolidation” which, according to historian Nicholas Vincent stopped “just short of genocide [...]. All the chroniclers agree that William’s campaign against the north of England in the winter of 1069-70 was fought with deliberate brutality to provoke famine and suffering” (Vincent, 2018). Therefore, we can conclude that one of the greatest milestones in English history consisted in the submission of a whole population by a foreign king through violent means. This brutal policy continued under the reigns of William’s successors in the throne. Historian Carolly Erickson describes the efficient ruling of Henry I in the following terms:

“If any royal servants committed crimes, they suffered the king’s swift summary justice: amputation of hands, feet or genitals – or blinding. The king’s edicts were enforced, and his governance was efficient. But that meant that his tax collectors were also efficient – and ruthless. ‘They showed no regard for piety or pity,’ the monk Eadmer wrote, ‘[Their] extortion, frightful and cruel, beat down like a raging storm upon all.’ Poor peasants with no money were driven from their huts, their furniture seized, reduced to utter wretchedness by the tax gatherers. For them, the reign of King Henry meant peace and order, but at the price of misery and want.” (Eriksson, 2007: 38).

### **3. Protestantism and Reformation. Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.**

The division of Christianity between Catholics and Protestants can be attributed to the English king Henry VIII: when Pope Alexander VI refused to grant him the divorce from Spanish Catherine of Aragon because she had not given birth to a male successor, this formidable monarch decided to divorce himself and all his subjects from the Catholic Church. From a less personal perspective, a complementary goal for this king was to detach himself and his kingdom from a European project: the Emperor Charles V of

Germany and I of Spain's *Universitas Christiana*. Therefore, this move can be considered as an antecedent – distant as it may be – to contemporary Brexit. In any case, imposing a new religion in England proved a titanic task. A huge propagandistic machinery was required to convince the English population that the old faith was wrong and the new, the English or Anglican, was right. Furthermore, this first Brexit led (or at least contributed crucially) to the religion wars which ravaged Europe for almost three centuries, with an estimated death toll of between eight and fifteen million people, depending on the sources.

Let us now consider the role of propaganda in the Elizabethan age. Protestant indoctrination became essential to the Virgin Queen for a good reason: she depended entirely on the legitimacy of Anglicanism, because according to the Catholic Church, the marriage of her parents (Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn) was null and void. Therefore, her position on the throne was very unstable, and she did all that was in her hands to annihilate Catholicism. Her policies brought about terrible economic and social consequences for her Catholic subjects, as we will see.

Queen Elizabeth was a remarkable monarch, as intelligent as she was relentless. A good example of her cruelty was the treatment that she dispensed to the English sailors who had fought against the Spanish Invincible Army: with the aim of saving money for her bankrupt kingdom, she delayed paying these men by keeping the returning ships anchored just outside the port. Since sailors only received their wages once they stepped onto firm land, hunger and illnesses on board were effective allies to reduce the amount of the payroll (Fuller, 2009: 381-382). Another example of her cruelty can be found in the following comparison established by William Cobbet between the Virgin Queen and the Spanish Inquisition: “[from its first establishment], the Spanish Inquisition [...] has not committed so much cruelty as this first Protestant queen committed in any one single year of the forty-three years of her reign.” (Cobbet, 1896: 279) <sup>(2)</sup>.

For several reasons, Protestants were far more efficient at propaganda than Catholics, and spread thousands of pamphlets among the population to guide them towards the new faith (Edwards, 1994:16). A more subtle method of propaganda against the Catholic incipient Spanish empire was inaccurate translations: John Phillips' 1656 rendering of Bartolomé de Las Casas' famous *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* has been analysed in the following terms: “The translator, John Phillips, appropriated the text to create an anti-Spanish narrative with a view to promoting English nationalism as well as encouraging the construction of an English empire in the Americas.” (Valdeón, 2012).

One might feel tempted to dismiss these ideas as irrelevant or obsolete. However, a certain kind of propaganda can be efficient not only at the time of its publication, but also several centuries later: “Evidence is also provided for the long-lasting influence of this [John Phillips’] version [of the *Brevísima*], which, five centuries later, continues to be used in Anglophone schools and academia (particularly in the United States), in spite of its serious flaws and the existence of more recent and accurate retranslations.” (Ibidem).

In the centuries to come, the interpretation of economic success from the perspective of the Protestant ethics as a sign of divine grace, as famously described by Max Weber<sup>(3)</sup> would justify countless atrocities committed in the name of imperialism, such as massacres, slavery, abuse and other forms of human degradation. Thus, in the name of free trade, piracy was not only allowed but encouraged, for example by Elizabeth I, as a solution to the chronic bankruptcy of her kingdom.

#### **4. Spanish gold and English pirates**

After Columbus reached America and the Spanish galleons started to return to Europe loaded with gold, the English, anxious to benefit from Spanish wealth, began to attack and raid these galleons. Later on, the most efficient pirates, such as Francis Drake or Henry Morgan, would be knighted by Queen Elizabeth. In many paintings of the era English pirates appear dressed as gentlemen:



Plate 2: Portrait of (Sir) Francis Drake



## 5. The British Empire

At its peak in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the British Empire was the widest empire that has ever existed on earth, comprising around 31 million square kilometers or a fourth part of the planet. For comparison, the second largest was the Mongol Empire (24 million square kilometers) in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, with the Spanish Empire in fourth position (20 million square kilometers) in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century. The building of this colossal empire required a high level of violence and cruelty, conveniently embellished by official propaganda:



Plate 3: Britannia



Plate 4: World War I poster

This propaganda operated at very different levels. For example, an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Australian schoolbook claimed that “Englishmen are especially fitted by nature” to be colonists because they are “persevering, unflinching, [...] patriotic [...] [and] love order and justice.” (Hight, 1902:19-20). Similarly, novels transformed the empire into a romantic setting for adventure and heroism. Furthermore, many everyday products such as soap, matches or chocolate were advertised by making allusion to the empire. The ultimate justification for the exploitation of distant peoples and lands was, evidently, the “civilisational mission” of the white man. For instance, as late as 1948 the Central Office of Information defined the colonies as “those units of the Commonwealth which still need guidance and help from colonial Britain.” (Levine, 2013: 134).

There was, however, an abyss between ideals and reality, as is often the case with human collective enterprises. An historical anecdote about the recruitment methods of the British Navy illustrates this point very clearly. Evidently, an overseas empire needs a formidable navy; and the British Navy was and still is a source of pride for many Britons. However, the conditions of the sailors composing it were in the past often very poor, due to scurvy, flogging and miserable salaries. Therefore, not many able men, except the very desperate, felt appealed by this professional career. How did the Admiralty solve this problem? By resorting to impressment, or forceful recruitment. Apart from aggressive gangs who stormed into houses at night, a more cunning method was used, called “The King’s shilling”: since accepting that sum of money from the recruiters amounted to officially signing in, the prospective recruits were offered a tankard of beer in which a one-shilling coin had been previously placed. If the merry and naïve lad gulped in the coin together with the liquid, he automatically became a sailor at Her Majesty’s service (Anderson, 2001).

Let us now consider the different parts of this huge empire separately, in a rough chronological order:

#### 5.1. Internal colonies: Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

The British Empire started internally, with the domination of Wales (1536), Scotland (1707) and Ireland (1801). These years refer to the time when these territories were formally attached to the British crown, but the entanglements between these peoples and England had begun many centuries ago. For the sake of brevity, we will focus on the territory where the English have probably committed more atrocities in the last millennium: Ireland.

The Norman barons began the occupation of the neighbouring island around 1169, starting a process of subjugation that has stretched until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As is well known, during queen Elizabeth’s reign the English policy towards Ireland revolved around the concept of “plantation”: it was assumed that Ireland would only be secure and peaceful if settled by a loyal English population. This new policy transformed Ireland from a marginal and troublesome part of the dominion into an attractive business venture for people like Walter Raleigh, who served in the year 1580 in Elizabeth’s army in Ireland, distinguishing himself by his ruthlessness at the siege of Smerwick and by the plantation of English and Scots Protestants in Munster. Elizabeth rewarded him with a

large estate in Ireland, knighted him, and gave him trade privileges and the right to colonize America. He became one of the most important landowners in the Munster region.



Plate 5: Portrait of (Sir) Walter Raleigh, with his motto, *Amor et Virtute*, in the background.

This colonial policy set in motion the following cyclical pattern: the process of plantation provoked confrontation with the existing holders of the land, which sometimes led to rebellion. The English government responded with military expeditions which, in turn, if successful, would lead to further plantations. For example, around 3,000 people were killed in the Drogheda massacre in 1649 by the parliamentary troops sent by Oliver Cromwell. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry:

The carnage inside the city was appalling. Cromwell's troops killed priests and monks on sight and set light to a Catholic church sheltering some soldiers. Civilians as well as soldiers were massacred. What happened at Drogheda was replicated at Wexford [...] and Clonmel [...]. (Adams, 2021).

Eventually, this system resulted in the most striking English blow to Irish morals, still very present nowadays in the Irish imagery: the great potato famine endured from 1845 to 1852. It has been argued that the reduction of the Irish population by 20-25% (around one million deaths plus another one million emigrants, out of an 8.5-million total) was due to natural causes – notably, a potato crop failure caused by a fungus. However, it is worth noting here that, from 1695 until 1829, the “Penal Laws” emanating from Westminster had been imposed upon the Irish Catholics precisely with the aim of submitting them into near slavery. To that end, they were deprived not only of land, but also of education and other fundamental rights: for example, they were not allowed to practise their religion, to engage in trade or even to enter a profession. These brutal policies imposed upon Ireland were soon denounced by such famous authors as Jonathan Swift or Edmund Burke. For example, in his sarcastic pamphlet *A Modest Proposal*, the

writer of *Gulliver's Travels* proposes cannibalism as a solution both for Ireland's poverty and England's scarcity of meat: Irish babies as food for English families. Less sarcastically, in his essay "A Short View of the Present State of Ireland" he describes the dire situation of the Irish population in the following terms:

The rise of our rents is squeezed out of the very blood and vitals, and clothes, and dwellings of the tenants who live worse than English beggars. [...] The families of farmers who pay great rents, [are] living in filth and nastiness upon butter-milk and potatoes, without a shoe or stocking to their feet, or a house so convenient as an English hog-sty to receive them. (Swift, 1728).

The philosopher George Berkeley wondered in a journal in 1736 "whether a foreigner could imagine that half of the people were starving in a country which sent out such plenty of provisions".

Indeed, the aim of these "Penal Laws", or legal frame for the British colonial policies, was to use Ireland as a source of raw materials and food, and its population as indentured labour. According to historian Christine Kinealy, in the year 1847, when around 400,000 people starved to death in Ireland, around 4,000 vessels carried food from Ireland into the main ports of Great Britain, and the food came from the most famine-stricken regions of Ireland. Approximately 1,000,000 gallons of butter were imported from Ireland into England in the year 1847 only (Kinealy, 1997).

Having reached this point, one might wonder how the British population can bear this horrifying load upon their conscience. There is an answer for that: just like the Bayeux Tapestry did in the times of William the Conqueror, the BBC plays nowadays a very notable and efficient role in cleansing the past. For instance, in the introduction to the book *The Great Famine*, designed to accompany a BBC documentary or modern (1995) piece of propaganda entitled "Great Irish Famine", John Percival, the film producer, writes:

The memories of Irish people, like the folk memories of people everywhere, are an inextricable tangle of history and mythology, of slogans, songs and stories picked up on grandma's knee. Myth is painted in stark whites and blacks, images of good versus evil, and such stories are often more potent than history in shaping events. Unscrupulous leaders use them to sway the mob and motivate the terrorist. History is far more ambiguous. Motives are often mixed, bad actions are fired by good intentions, the villains turn out to have some redeeming features and their victims are not all saints or martyrs. So it is with the history of the Great Famine. (Mullin, 2008).

In a few sentences, one of the most tragic human catastrophes in the last two centuries is reduced to a product of the Irish childish imagination, a “story” instead of History. And a particularly dangerous one, besides, because it is used to “motivate the terrorist”. On the contrary, the “bad actions” of the Empire are due to “good intentions”. The hunger and the humiliation endured by a whole country were, nonetheless, very real, and they have naturally left a traumatic imprint on the Irish people, as stated. This mistreatment of a whole nation did not prevent, however, the English propaganda from trying to recruit Irishmen only some decades later, during World War I, by appealing to a curious concept: “The real Irish spirit”:



Plate 6: World War I recruitment poster (c. 1915)

Understandably, another, very different “Irish Spirit” arose during World War I, and it brought along the “Easter Rising” of 1916, whereby a group of Irish republicans took to the arms and occupied the Dublin post office with the aim of pressing for an independent Irish Republic. Although the rebellion was quickly put down and only less than 500 were killed in total (McGreevy, 2015), the English repression that followed was merciless: around 3,500 people were arrested, court-martialled or deported for internment in England. That was the reward for those who had dared to “stab the Empire in the back” in wartime.

Along the following decades, Ireland would become an independent country, but the price paid for this independence was high: a country divided into a Protestant, English

Ulster in the Northeast and a Catholic, Irish Republic in the rest of the island. The violent conflict that opposed the Irish Republican Army or IRA and the British Army for the second part of the 20th Century, euphemistically referred to in England as “The Troubles”, killed thousands of people: 3,524 from 1969 to 2001 (Sutton, 1994) including the 13 unarmed civilians shot in Derry on Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972.

## 5.2. North America

The first English colonists who arrived in America survived thanks to the aid of Native Americans such as Squanto, who taught the ill-prepared newcomers how to cultivate the land. However, the long-term result of this initially fruitful relationship is as sad as well-known: the near extermination of the country’s original inhabitants, first at the hands of the English colonists, ultimately by their successors, the Americans. The idyllic “City of God upon a Hill”, as famously envisaged by John Winthrop in 1630, would eventually become a “Trail of Tears”, a rather poetic term to refer to the near extermination of the whole Native American culture.

The end of the relationship between England and Native Americans is another instance of English perfidy: despite the significant support provided by several Indian tribes to England during the American independence war, the peace settlement of 1783 failed even to make mention of their future. Furthermore, England did not support the Native Americans in the wars that erupted between them and the new American republic in the 1780s and 1790s.

It could be argued that such a tragic outcome of colonisation is not restricted to the English colonies. Evidently, Spanish conquistadores also caused many deaths in present-day Central and South America. However, a clear distinction can be drawn between the two empires: whereas the English considered their colonies rather as settlements designed to exploit foreign territories and populations, the Spanish colonies were in effect part of the same administrative system, and their citizens enjoyed the same status as the citizens living in the metropoli. Several facts support this distinction:

- a) There was never a debate in England about the rights of the Native Americans. (Mombelli and Salomoni, 2020).
- b) The English founded Harvard, their first university on American soil in the year 1636. By that time, the Spaniards had already founded a dozen of them, having

started one century earlier with the university of Santo Domingo, in 1538. Furthermore, Spanish universities in America were open to natives as well as to creoles and Spaniards (Casado and Alonso, 2005).

- c) The Spaniards intermingled genetically with the native inhabitants much more frequently, as attested by today's prevailing mixture of races in Latin America, very differently from English "white colonies" such as Australia, Canada, South Africa or New Zealand.

Let us now move to Asia, where the English managed to submit a millennial civilisation, referred to in imperial times as "The Jewel in the Crown".

### 5.3. India

Only two decades after 1578, the year when Queen Elizabeth I had granted Humphrey Gilbert a patent to "discover [...] such remote heathen and barbarous lands" in America, in the year 1600 she granted another Royal Chart for the "Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies". As was the case in the American continent, Britain progressively imposed itself upon the former colonial powers: Portugal and Holland, first; then, France. At its peak, in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the East India Company kept an army of 260,000 men and accounted for around half of the British trade (Blakemore, 2019). As in any other portentous human achievement, the path to this economic glory was not easy. The picture below is helpful to shed light on the process:



Plate 7: Battle of Plassey

This painting captures a crucial moment (1757) for the expansion of the British Empire, as this battle meant its definitive triumph over both the Nawab of Bengal and France. The origin of this particular clash was the fortification of Calcutta by the English, an action which broke their previous agreement with the Mughals. The nawab of Bengal reacted by capturing Calcutta and imprisoning several Europeans. This, in turn, angered the English, who sent Company troops under the commandment of Robert Clive. The nawab's forces were easily defeated.

In the image we can see several English and Indian gentlemen (in the foreground, Robert Clive and Mir Jafar) negotiating the peace terms after the battle. If the immediate cause of the battle had been a treacherous act by the British, its denouement was not less shameful: Jafar, the commander of the Indian troops, was bribed by Clive and then appointed as the new nawab. Therefore, this picture can be regarded as an effective means to clean up the public image of two conspirators.

From this moment onwards, the expansion of the East India Company in the subcontinent would be unopposed, with terrible consequences for the locals: since the land traditionally employed to grow cereal or to feed cattle was now used by the East India Company in order to meet the European demand for Indian textiles (cotton and silk), the peasants lost their fields and crops, and subsequently suffered famine and poverty. Furthermore, second-rate cotton clothing manufactured in Lancashire was imported and sold in India. The introduction of this low-cost product destroyed small weaving workshops and brought in more poverty. It is generally estimated that the subsequent 1770 Bengal famine killed between seven and ten million people, or one third of the local population (Devalle and Uranga, 2008). One and a half centuries later, M. Gandhi's image using a traditional loom became iconic.

Meanwhile, English officers at the service of the East India Company were thriving and becoming millionaires, to such an extent that British public opinion began to feel scandalized. As a result, Clive was put on trial in Parliament under the charge of abusing the people of Bengal for the sake of his personal wealth. However, the national hero was finally acquitted. He is nowadays described by Wikipedia as "Major-General Robert Clive, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Clive, Knight of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath and Fellow of the Royal Society".



In an attempt to appease the English public conscience, a position was created to monitor the activities of East India Company officers: the Governor-General. To no avail: Warren Hastings, Clive's successor as *de-facto* Governor-General of Bengal from 1772 to 1785, was accused of corruption and impeached in 1787. After a long trial, however, he was acquitted as well as his predecessor. Furthermore, he was later appointed Privy Councillor. According to Wikipedia, he is considered "The Right Honourable Warren Hastings, Fellow of the Royal Society."

Along the century following the battle of Plassey, the tension between the colonisers and the colonized would rise until the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, after which brutal punishment was exacted. The estimations differ, but even British historians reckon that hundreds of thousands of Indians were brutally killed. Indian author Amaresh Misra's calculations reach up to ten million in the following ten years (Misra, 2008).

To stay on British Indian territory, we must also mention another bloodshed milestone: the Amritsar massacre, which took place in 1919. Even the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* acknowledges that "on April 13, 1919 [...] British troops fired on a large crowd of unarmed Indians in an open space known as the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar in the Punjab region (now Punjab State) of India, killing several hundred people and wounding many hundreds more" (Pletcher, 2021).

#### 5.4. Africa: slavery and the Boers wars.

##### 5.4.1. Africa

Although the slave trade had been started by the Portuguese, whose first expeditions with human cargo date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the English soon followed track: Sir John Hawkins has the redoubtable honour of pioneering this lucrative business in his country from 1554 onwards, and Elizabeth I herself invested in a number of his slave-trading voyages. Interestingly, it should be noted that by this time the Emperor Charles V had abolished slavery in the Spanish Empire through his "New Laws of the Indies for the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians", issued in 1542 and based on moral and theological grounds (Garcia Anoveros, 2000). Although the Spanish Empire continued benefiting from the slave trade indirectly, it seems clear that a debate did exist in Spain regarding the moral and theological aspects of slavery. For the rest of European powers, the crown-sponsored slave trade continued to increase. Especially for England: though Portuguese and Dutch remained ahead during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, by the 17<sup>th</sup> they had been

surpassed by France and Britain. By the 1690s Britain shipped more African slaves across the Atlantic than any other nation (Levine, 2013:21). The African population of England by the mid-eighteenth century has been estimated at around 20,000 and advertisements of runaway slaves were common in the contemporary press (Ruane, 2018).

Therefore, we can conclude that colonialism and slavery benefited not only a small fraction of the English population, or families such as the Gladstones or the Beckfords. On the contrary, apart from the more than 40,000 British slave owners, many others were involved in this inhuman trade, for example by means of shares in the slave companies. According to the University College London, “10 to 20% of Britain's wealthy can be identified as having had significant links to slavery.” (Jolly, 2020).

From a more theoretical perspective, a curious contradiction can be found in Liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill. Nowadays hailed by feminists as a defender of individual freedom, he justified colonialism as an interference allowed regarding “barbarous neighbours” (Mill, 1859: 766-77)<sup>(4)</sup>. It might be worth noting here that Mill himself, a precocious child, worked as an administrator for the East India Company for more than half of his life.

At any rate, it is difficult not to associate the exploitation of those barbarous neighbours with the centuries-long wealth of some English families. A good example are the Pitts: Thomas Pitt (1653-1726) was an English merchant who made his fortune by simply ignoring the East India Company’s monopoly on the trade with India. This did not prevent him from serving for the Company some years later as governor of Madras. Such a lucrative post allowed him to buy a seat in Parliament and, eventually, both his grandson (William Pitt) and great-grandson (Pitt the Younger) became prime ministers of the UK.

#### 5.4.2. Cecil Rhodes and the Boers wars.



Plate 8: The Rhodes Colossus (1892)

Another especially cruel landmark in Africa was reached by the British during the Boer wars (1899-1902): in order to realize Cecil Rhodes' imperial dreams (basically, appropriating as much land, gold and diamonds as possible for himself and for the Empire), the British troops resorted to scorching farms and to concentrating the civil population in camps, with the aim of convincing the Dutch colonists to abandon their territories. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Noncombatant deaths include the more than 26,000 Boer women and children estimated to have died in the concentration camps from malnutrition and disease." (Augustyn et al, 2020).

Naturally, the Empire's advertising machinery produced a convenient image to commemorate these terrible events. And not an entirely deceptive one: even if Britannia looks beautiful and poses in a kind, even merciful attitude, it is difficult not to perceive how close the grip of the sword is to her left hand:



Plate 9: Poster celebrating the British victory in the Second Boer War (1900)

## 5.5. Australia

It is very difficult to provide an accurate number for the aboriginal population of Australia at the time when James Cook reached its shores (1770), but according to modern research the figure was at least over 250,000 (Gibbons, 2015) . This did not prevent the English from invoking a very convenient juridical term, "Terra Nullius", to label uncultivated land as available for occupation. Such doctrine would not be rejected until 1992, in the legal case *Mbabo vs Queensland*.



Plate 10: Captain Cook taking possession of the Australian continent

In fact, the abundant presence of natives was soon perceived and acknowledged by some distinguished English minds, even from a humanist perspective. For example, the President of the Royal Society, co-sponsor of Captain Cook's journeys, in clear contrast to Mr Mills' views, warned Cook that

“[T]he Natives [...] are the natural, and in the strictest sense of the word, the legal possessors of the several Regions they inhabit. No European nation has a right to occupy any part of their country, or settle among them without their voluntary consent. Conquest over such people can give no just title: because they can never be Aggressors.” (Daley, 2018).

However, reality was not as humanitarian. After their previous colonising experiences, both internally and abroad, the English had perfected their methods as regards occupying foreign land. Exactly as it had been the case in America, the first settlers depended on Aboriginals to survive in an unknown, hostile environment; and yet, in exchange for their crucial support to find water and food or to avoid storms, the native guides normally received just rations of food. In time, when the white colonists started to thrive on their own, war erupted between them and the now unnecessary native population, with the expected results: the Aboriginals were finally subdued by means of massacres and impoverishment. The procedure could be roughly described as follows: first, the British soldiers shot at Aboriginal villagers and afterwards, they drove the survivors out of the fertile lands. These lands could then be conveniently occupied by the accurately called “squatters”, who ultimately would become a kind of Australian aristocracy. According to modern research, approximately 30.000 aboriginals were killed in the so-called “frontier wars” (Reynolds, 2013). The picture below shows one of these clashes, from the Aboriginal perspective:



Plate 11: The Myall Creek Massacre (1838)

The colonisation process was only slightly different in New Zealand, where the Waitangi treaty was concluded between the British and the Maori. In theory, the treaty offered British protection in exchange for an exclusive British right to purchase Maori land. In practice, it was impossible for the original inhabitants to refuse to sell their land, and by 1861, two-thirds of New Zealand land had been sold at extremely low prices (Levine, 2013: 62-63).

Eventually, Australia and NZ became “white colonies”, thanks in part to such posters as the one below, where the term “white” is reproduced three times in capital letters, in different fonts:

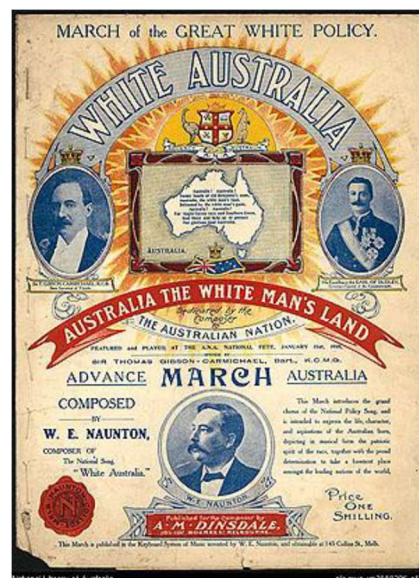


Plate 12: White Australia

Evidently, in this white Australia there was no place for its original inhabitants. As a matter of fact, a clear link existed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the imperial imagery between the progress of civilization and the eradication of Aboriginal culture.

Accordingly, Aboriginals were deported to concentration camps following a rather cruel policy called “Smooth the Dying Pillow”, which basically expected the inferior race to die off, according to social Darwinism. But social Darwinism was not as quick or efficient as expected. Therefore, a strategy was deployed to accelerate the process: from around 1870 to the 1970s, Aboriginal children were abducted from their families, very superficially educated in the English language and culture, and then brought to white families to work as servants. The number of children belonging to these “Stolen Generations” has been estimated at 20,000 as the lowest figure (Manne, 2001).

From a more contemporary perspective, Australia is nowadays part of what some *realpolitikers* call “The Anglo-Saxon Axis”, or “Anglo Bloc”, composed by the US, the UK and Australia. This alliance has been recently updated and formalized through the Aukus pact in the context of the current – October 2021 – diplomatic crisis about nuclear-powered submarines, which has further complicated the UK’s relations with the UE after Brexit (O’Brien, 2021).

#### 5.6. China and the Opium Wars

Although China was never part of the British Empire, the Opium Wars deserve at least a mention in this paper. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the balance of trade between Great Britain and China was clearly favourable to the latter, since British consumers had grown accustomed to Chinese tea, silk and porcelain, whereas no British product was so interesting for the Chinese. As a result, British silver was flowing into China. To compensate this deficit, the East India Company started to trade with Indian opium in China in large amounts, as attested by this picture:



Plate 13: A “stacking room” in an opium factory in Patna, India. On the shelves are balls of opium.

Although opium was forbidden by the Chinese government in the year 1800, the British merchants continued to introduce this addictive and deteriorating drug in China. The mechanism was very simple, and as productive as it was ruthless: opium was cultivated by Indian slaves in the Indian lands owned by the East India Company in that country, and then smuggled into China and exchanged for Chinese products. Net balance: hunger and slavery in India; drug-addiction in China; silver, tea, porcelain and silk for England.

In an attempt to end with this illicit trade, Chinese officers ordered in 1839 the destruction of an important cargo of opium contained in ships anchored close to the Chinese shore. This was the excuse needed by the British to start the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60). The technological superiority of the British Navy over the obsolete Chinese fleet allowed the British to win easily, and therefore to impose the conditions of trade in the area: invoking their rather peculiar conception of free trade, the British pushed into the Chinese market a product which was forbidden in their own country.

5.7. Conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan: the 1916 Sykes-Picot contradictory arrangements, the McMahon-Hussein letters and the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

This case is possibly not so widely known as the previous facts that we have already reviewed. However, both the degree of perfidy and the lethality of the results grant it a top place in the ranking of British excess. In a nutshell: first, the British and the French divided the Middle East region in two spheres of influence by means of the Sykes-Picot arrangements. Then, two different English diplomats promised the same land to two different peoples: the Israeli and the Palestinian. Indeed, in his letters to Hussein, Sharif of Mecca, the British high commissioner Sir Henry McMahon promised Arab independence after World War I in exchange for Arab support against the Ottoman Empire. At about the same time, the 1917 Balfour Declaration promised British “favour” to a “national home for the Jewish people” in the following terms:

“His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object...”

The conflict so ignited, fuelled in 1948 by the proclamation of the State of Israel, has been burning to this date, with a very high death and economic toll for both sides. Evidently, the roots of this confrontation can be traced back to biblical times, but the modern Middle

East was created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The British diplomacy, eager to take benefit from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire (oil had been discovered in the region in 1908) concocted an explosive scenario, with terrible consequences up to our days. For instance, even Jack Straw, then British foreign secretary, admitted in 2002 that:

“A lot of the problems we are having to deal with now, I have to deal with now, are a consequence of our colonial past ... The Balfour Declaration and the contradictory assurances which were being given to Palestinians in private at the same time as they were being given to the Israelis — again, an interesting history for us but not an entirely honourable one.” (Beard, 2002).

From a contemporary perspective, the collapse of Arab nation states in the area can be considered as crucial factor for the rise of Islamism and consequently, for the “War between civilizations” that has shaped our world since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the last phase of which being the US Army’s retreat from Afghanistan in September 2021. It might be convenient to mention here that the first Anglo-Afghan war took place in Afghanistan between 1839 and 1842, and it ended with a humiliating retreat of the British Army from Kabul, known in Britain as “the Disaster in Afghanistan” (Burton, 2012).

## **6. Mers-el-Kébir, July 3, 1940: British attack on French navy ships in Algeria.**

(This chapter of British history is not directly related to the British Empire, but it took place before the decolonisation, and it is sufficiently shocking to be mentioned here).

Even though France was an ally of Great Britain in World War II, Winston Churchill ordered the Royal Navy to destroy the French navy vessels stationed in the Algerian port of Mers-el-Kébir to prevent them from being used by Nazi Germany against the allies. Almost 1,300 French sailors were killed in the attack.



Plate 14: French vessels under British fire.



## **7. Decolonisation**

After World War II, nationalist movements spread throughout the British Empire seeking for independence. Mother Britain's reaction was not altogether benevolent: for example, in Kenya during the 1950s, the British resorted to very violent means in their attempt to extinguish the flames of the Mau Mau rebellion, with an estimated black death toll of around 10,000 (against a white death toll of around 70) and the destruction of entire villages. Even at the end of its days, the Empire fought fiercely for its life.

## **8. Brexit as a betrayal to Europe**

As is well-known, in 2016 the British people were asked via referendum if the UK should remain in the UE, and the result was negative (around 17 million voted for abandoning the EU, versus around 16 million in favour of remaining). This has given rise to a series of disturbances both for the British (notably for Scotland, whose population voted against Brexit) and for the rest of Europe. According to jurist Felix de la Fuente, Brexit can be considered a triple betrayal of the British rulers: to the European project, to the British citizens in favour of the European project and to the rest of European citizens (de la Fuente, 2019).

The negative impact of Brexit can be summarised as follows:

- EU students and EU workers need now visas to study and work in the UK.
- UK citizens residing in the EU need visas as well.
- British economy is suffering a shortage crisis.

Considering all these negative effects, which evidently had been foreseen by many, a question arises: What was the reason for a majority of British voters to leave Europe? According to the paper "Who voted for Brexit? Individual and regional data combined", published in the European Journal of Political Economy: "[V]oting Leave is associated with older age, white ethnicity, low educational attainment, infrequent use of smartphones and the internet, receiving benefits, adverse health and low life satisfaction." (Alabrese et al, 2019).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the real reason behind Brexit was the fear felt by the white, older and less educated Britons towards a European integration generally

identified with higher immigration and lower security. After several decades of reverse colonization, during which the inhabitants of the former British colonies have been arriving to provide the UK with cheap labour force, the sons of the Empire now prefer to fend by themselves rather than submitting to the policies dictated from Brussels.

## **9. British influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Considering the reduction of its geographical territory, its fears of immigrants and of the European Union, it is tempting to view present-day Great Britain as a decadent, weak, unconfident country in search of identity. A country which does not seem to fit in our contemporary world: neither a great empire nor part of Europe, and in need of the USA to play a role in international politics, the UK is in these days – November 2021– severely affected by a shortage of food and energy due, among other reasons, to the negative impact of the Brexit, as already seen. And yet, is this really so? Has the former glorious empire become, due to the invisible hand of karma, a ruined nation, a secondary actor in the international arena? Certainly not, if we take into account what Joseph Nye termed “soft power”: a kind of cultural influence very different from the military or “hard” power but nevertheless a means of imposing a nation’s interests in order to gain economic benefits. In his own words, this kind of power implies “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” (Nye, 2004).

This British contemporary soft power can be described in the following manner:

-Thanks to the Commonwealth, the UK enjoys good diplomatic and economic relations with most former British colonies. Not very differently from older times, these territories still provide a worldwide market and a varied source of labour force and raw materials. In addition, the undeniable leadership of the UK in this large association of sovereign states –54 members in 2021– translates into a considerable British political influence in international organizations such as the United Nations.

-The City of London is still a top international financial and trade centre, and the headquarters to the most important multinational companies, such as HSBC, Shell, BP, Barclays, or Lloyd’s.

-Many British brands enjoy a sort of ever-lasting charm and therefore consequent international economic success, such as Rolls Royce, Aston Martin, Triumph, Mini, Land Rover, Barbour, Burberry, Lipton, Cadbury, Johnnie Walker, Vodafone or Reebok.

A good example of the importance of style and aesthetics in this new, more subtle form of imperialism is the integration of the Union Jack in the turn signals of the latest Mini cars:



Plate 15: Union Jack turn signals by Mini

-Several British media rank among the most influential of the world: the *BBC* (including its branches, such as the *Lonely Planet* travel guides), *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*... The *British Broadcasting Corporation* has already been mentioned in this paper, but it is worthy remarking here that, according to its own estimations, this national, tax-financed TV channel is followed by almost half a billion adults worldwide (Davie, 2021).

-The intellectual prestige of a few British universities, notably Cambridge and Oxford, invests their professors and their output with almost unchallengeable authority. Apart from such relevant and traditional institutions as the Cambridge Certificates (for English as a foreign language) and the Oxford Electronic Dictionary, it is remarkable that one of the few Covid-19 vaccines authorized is called Oxford-AstraZeneca. For a good reason: it was developed in the UK conjointly by the University of Oxford and the British-Swedish pharmaceutical corporate AstraZeneca, headquartered in Cambridge.

-Several so-called Non-Governmental Organizations (but still largely financed by states and taxpayers) such as Oxfam, Save the Children, and Amnesty International are British.

-If the influence of some of the just mentioned organisations is largely considered as beneficial for the world, this positive influence is nevertheless probably outweighed by one of the most curious by-products of the British Empire: the tax havens. According to the *Tax Justice Network*, the three most toxic corporate tax havens in the world fly the Union Jack: Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, and the Cayman Islands. It is probably unnecessary to explain here how disturbing these havens are for the economies of other countries.

At any rate, there is a point on which modern historians, even from such different perspectives as Niall Fergusson's and Philippa Levine's, seem to agree: our contemporary world has been shaped to a large extent by the British Empire. Fergusson's attitude to the empire is kinder, or at least more neutral: "For better for worse [...] the world we know today is in large measure the product of Britain's age of Empire." (Fergusson, 2003: xxviii). Levine is more critical: "[A] good deal of the contemporary crises we face owe at least something to the activities and policies of the British." (Levine, 2013:xi).

## **10. Conclusion**

From what has been exposed so far one might get the impression that the English are one of the most wicked and cruel folks in human history. However, the Spaniards might be also held at least indirectly accountable for that: first, the Iberian genes turned the primitive inhabitants of the British Isles into powerful warriors. More importantly, the Spanish Empire (or, more precisely, the Spanish galleons loaded with American gold) triggered the English colonist greed, which later developed into capitalism, industrialisation, globalization and consumerism.

Depending on one's personal perspective, capitalism and mass consumption can be considered as something positive or negative, but there is something frightening in the excessive concentration of capital in a few hands, in the exploitation of humans as workforce and in the exhaustion of natural resources. These traits or tendencies of our contemporary world can be seen as the outcome of the Protestant ethics which identify economic success with divine grace, and Protestantism can be regarded as an invention of the English which has helped to build the British identity for centuries. In a great measure, by opposition to Catholicism, as already seen. In addition, the legendary perfidy deployed by the British diplomacy in pursuit of purely lucrative goals has determined to a large extent the volatile situation of the contemporary international arena.

And yet, despite all the previous evidence, the adjective "British" curiously embodies, still nowadays, rather positive connotations, such as "fashionable", "sophisticated", or "glamorous". To the extent that, despite the centuries-long row over Gibraltar, the Union Jack can often be seen in Spanish territory on clothes, cars, or other designer products, as already mentioned. Middle class Spanish families go to London on shopping sprees and Harrod's bags and paraphernalia are popular among us. Many cultivated Spaniards consider William Shakespeare the best writer of all times, Sherlock Holmes the most

intelligent detective, and James Bond the most successful secret agent. Just as Spanish teenagers consider Harry Potter the most amazing wizard.

The only possible explanation for the overwhelming success of contemporary Albion is the wide-ranging, long-term efficiency of British propaganda. Winston Churchill expressed it very clearly in 1943: “The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.”

## 11. Endnotes

1. The Iberian origin of the first settlers of the British Isles has been generally accepted by historians for centuries, following a tradition started by Tacitus. The Roman historian concludes that the dark skin and curly hair of the Silures (one of the main tribes that inhabited England before the Roman conquest), and the geographical vicinity of the Spanish coast prove the passage and the occupation of British territory by Iberian ancestors. *Tacitus Annales*, Xi.ii, translated by M. Hutton. In <http://www.roman-britain.co.uk/tribes/silures/> (Last retrieved: 18<sup>th</sup> November 2021).

Several historians have supported this theory, such as Joseph Ritson in *Memoirs of the Celts or Gauls*. London: Payne and Foss, 1827, pg. 114; or anthropologists such as William Boyd Dawkins, cited by Chris Manias in “Our Iberian Forefathers”; *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 51, Issue 4, October 2012, pp. 910 – 935 (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/666730>). (Last retrieved: 18<sup>th</sup> November 2021).

Some of these authors, interestingly for the purpose of this paper, have remarked the bravery, stubbornness and heroism of the Silures at fighting for their liberty against Rome (*A New History of Great Britain from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Present Time* by Rev. John Adams. T.N. Longman & O. Rees, and T. Hurst, London, 1802, pg. 13); *The Foundation of England*, Vol. I by Sir James H. Ramsay, Swan Sonnenschein & Co. LTD, London, 1898, pg. 57; or *Origins of English History* by Charles Isaac Elton. Bernard Quaritch, London, 1890, pg. 138).

Although the previous references, cited to support an Iberian origin for the British population, were published more than a century ago, recent genetic research confirms precisely this point:

British Neolithic farmers were genetically similar to contemporary populations in continental Europe and in particular to Neolithic Iberians, suggesting that a portion of the farmer ancestry in Britain came from the Mediterranean rather than the Danubian route of farming expansion. (Olalde, I. et al, 2018: 190–196)

2. Please note that this author was both English and a Protestant. Other relevant paragraphs are:

On the measures adopted by Henry VIII to implement the Reformation in England: “It was not a ‘reformation’ but a ‘devastation,’ of England, and ‘this devastation impoverished and degraded the main body of the people.” (Cobbet, 1896: 21)

Elizabeth put, in one way or another, more Catholics to death in one year, for not becoming apostates to the religion which she had sworn to be hers, and to be the only true one, than Mary put to death in her whole reign for having apostatized from the religion of her and their fathers, and to which religion she herself had always adhered. Yet the former is called, or has been called, “good Queen Bess,” and the latter, “bloody Queen Mary.” (Cobbet, 1896: 224)

Arguments similar to these can be found in modern Irish authors such as Eamon Duffy and Christopher Haigh.

3. Although questioned and revised, Weber’s thesis, exposed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) is still generally accepted. For example, by Benito Arruñada (2010) in: Protestants and Catholics: Similar Work Ethic, Different Social Ethic. In *The Economic Journal*, 120 (547), pp. 890-918. [https://bse.eu/sites/default/files/working\\_paper\\_pdfs/497.pdf](https://bse.eu/sites/default/files/working_paper_pdfs/497.pdf) (Last retrieved: 9th Oct 2021).

4. According to J. S. Mill, “nations which are still barbarous have not got beyond the period during which it is likely to be for their benefit that they should be conquered and held in subjection by foreigners.” Therefore, “The sacred duties which civilized nations owe to the independence and nationality of each other, are not binding towards [barbarous peoples]” because “barbarians have no rights as a nation.” (Mill, 1859: 766-77).

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