

The British Empire's Mixed Legacy: An Analysis of Slavery Abolition, Industrial Revolution, and Disease Management

Hangyu Liang *

The Webb Schools of California, Claremont, United States

* Corresponding Author email: hliang@webb.org

Abstract. This paper examines the complex legacy of the British Empire, focusing on three key areas: the abolition of slavery, the Industrial Revolution, and the management of diseases, particularly malaria. While acknowledging the Empire's role in perpetuating slavery, this study argues that its eventual abolition efforts, contributions to industrial progress, and advancements in disease control had significant positive impacts. By analyzing historical events and their long-term consequences, this research provides a nuanced perspective on the British Empire's influence on global development and human rights.

Keywords: British Empire, slavery abolition, Industrial Revolution, malaria, Cinchona, colonial legacy.

1. Introduction

The British Empire, at its peak in the early 20th century, encompassed approximately 25% of the world's land mass and ruled over 458 million people [1]. Its impact on world history is undeniable, yet the nature of this impact remains a subject of intense debate. While many contemporary British citizens express pride in their imperial past, critics argue that the Empire's legacy is primarily one of exploitation and regressive social policies.

This paper aims to provide a balanced examination of the British Empire's legacy by focusing on three key areas: the abolition of slavery, the Industrial Revolution, and the management of diseases, particularly malaria. By analyzing these aspects, we seek to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Empire's role in shaping the modern world.

2. Literature Review

The historiography of the British Empire has evolved significantly over the past century. Early works, such as those by historians like J.R. Seeley, often presented a triumphalist narrative of British imperial expansion [2]. However, post-colonial scholars like Edward Said have challenged these perspectives, emphasizing the exploitative nature of imperial rule [3]. Recent scholarship has sought a more balanced approach. For instance, Niall Ferguson's "Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World" argues that the British Empire had both positive and negative impacts on global development [4]. Similarly, John Darwin's "Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain" provides a nuanced analysis of the Empire's complex legacy [5]. Regarding slavery, works like Eric Williams' "Capitalism and Slavery" have highlighted the economic motivations behind both the persistence and abolition of the slave trade [6]. The Industrial Revolution has been extensively studied by scholars such as T.S. Ashton and Pat Hudson, who have explored its far-reaching social and economic impacts [7, 8]. In the field of disease management, research by scholars like Philip D. Curtin has shed light on the role of disease in shaping imperial policies and practices [9]. The work of Roy Porter on the history of medicine provides valuable context for understanding the British Empire's approach to disease control [10].

3. The Abolition of Slavery

The British Empire's involvement in slavery is a complex and dark chapter in history. At its peak, the Empire was responsible for transporting over 3.1 million slaves across the Atlantic, with approximately 400,000 perishing en route due to the horrific conditions aboard slave ships [11]. The slave trade was a cornerstone of the Empire's economic power, providing labor for plantations and fueling industrial growth. The Code of Hammurabi, dating back to 1792-1750 B.C., established the first clearly defined slavery laws, treating slaves as property rather than people [12]. This dehumanizing perspective persisted for centuries, with slaves denied basic rights and subjected to brutal treatment. By the end of the 11th century, over 10% of England's population were slaves, a percentage that remained significant even as the Empire expanded [13].

However, the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw a dramatic shift in British policy towards slavery. This change was driven by a combination of factors, including evolving moral sensibilities, economic considerations, and growing abolitionist movements. The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787, played a crucial role in raising public awareness about the horrors of slavery [14]. The abolition movement gained significant momentum in the 1780s and 1790s, culminating in the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which prohibited the slave trade within the British Empire [15]. This landmark legislation was followed by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which freed over 800,000 slaves in most parts of the Empire [16]. The Act also provided for a system of apprenticeship, which was intended to ease the transition from slavery to freedom, although this system was itself criticized for perpetuating exploitation.

The British Empire's efforts to end slavery extended beyond its borders. The West Africa Squadron, established to patrol the West African coast, captured approximately 1,600 slave ships and freed over 150,000 African slaves between 1808 and 1860 [17]. This action significantly disrupted the global slave trade and set a precedent for other nations to follow. The abolition of slavery by the British Empire had far-reaching consequences. It contributed to the global movement for human rights and equality, influencing other nations to follow suit. The Empire's stance against slavery also shaped its diplomatic relations, as it pressured other countries to end their involvement in the slave trade. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that the abolition came after centuries of British involvement in and profit from the slave trade. The economic impact of abolition was softened for slave owners through government compensation, while former slaves received no reparations for their suffering. Moreover, the legacy of slavery continued to affect social structures and racial attitudes long after its official end.

The abolition of slavery represents a significant moral advancement, but it's essential to view it in the context of the Empire's broader history. As we transition to discussing the Industrial Revolution, we must recognize that the wealth generated through slavery played a role in fueling Britain's industrial growth, creating a complex interplay between moral progress and economic development.

4. The Industrial Revolution

The abolition of slavery marked a significant moral shift for the British Empire, but it also coincided with a period of unprecedented technological and economic change: the Industrial Revolution. This transformation, which began in Britain and spread throughout the Empire and beyond, reshaped the global economy and society in profound ways.

The British Empire played a crucial role in facilitating the Industrial Revolution, which had far-reaching impacts on global economic and social development. One of the key factors that set the stage for this transformation was the patent system, introduced in Britain in 1449 [18]. This system fostered innovation by protecting inventors' rights, creating a self-reinforcing loop of innovation and profit that drove technological advancements. The patent system provided a solution to the dangers faced by trade-secret-based businesses, encouraging inventors to divulge their knowledge in exchange for temporary monopoly rights. This led to the creation of a public knowledge base that significantly

increased people's innovation ability [19]. The success of this system in Britain became a model for other countries, further accelerating global technological progress.

One of the most significant inventions of this period was the steam engine, which revolutionized manufacturing, transportation, and agriculture [20]. The increased efficiency brought about by steam power led to higher production rates, lower commodity prices, and improved living standards for many. The steam engine's impact was particularly pronounced in industries such as coal mining, textile processing, and agricultural production [21]. The Industrial Revolution also led to significant advancements in food production, helping to sustain the growing population of the British Empire between the 1860s and 1940s [22]. The mechanization of agriculture increased crop yields and reduced the labor required for food production, freeing up workers for other industries. Moreover, many inventions from this era, such as electric motors and light bulbs, continue to shape our modern world [23]. The Industrial Revolution laid the groundwork for subsequent technological revolutions, including the current digital revolution.

However, it's important to note that the Industrial Revolution also brought significant challenges. The rapid urbanization that accompanied industrialization often led to poor living conditions for workers. Factories, while increasing productivity, often offered intolerable working conditions, with long hours, dangerous machinery, and child labor being common [24]. The environmental impact of the Industrial Revolution was also substantial. The increased use of coal led to air pollution in industrial cities, while the disposal of industrial waste contaminated water sources. These environmental issues would later become major global concerns. Despite these challenges, the long-term positive impacts of the Industrial Revolution on global technological and economic development are undeniable. The British Empire's role in fostering this revolution had far-reaching consequences, shaping the modern global economy and technological landscape.

As we consider the Empire's impact on global health, particularly in the management of diseases like malaria, it's important to recognize how the technological and economic advancements of the Industrial Revolution contributed to medical progress. The increased wealth generated by industrialization, along with advances in transportation and manufacturing, would play a crucial role in the development and distribution of medical treatments across the Empire.

5. Disease Management: The Case of Malaria

As the British Empire expanded its territories and trade routes, it inadvertently facilitated the global spread of diseases, including the deadly malaria. However, the same expansive reach that contributed to this problem also played a crucial role in developing and distributing treatments, particularly for malaria, demonstrating how imperial resources could be leveraged for positive global health outcomes.

Malaria, caused by the *Plasmodium* parasite and transmitted by infected mosquitoes, has been a scourge of humanity throughout history [25]. Some estimates suggest that malaria may have killed half of all people who have ever lived, with a conservative estimate placing the death toll at about 4-5% of all humans who have ever existed – roughly equivalent to 20 billion people [26]. The British Empire's vast geographical expanse included regions ideal for cultivating *Cinchona*, the source of quinine – the primary treatment for malaria until the 1940s [27]. The bark of the *Cinchona* tree, indigenous to South America, was first brought to Europe by Spanish missionaries in the 17th century [28]. Knowledge of its medicinal properties spread to England and Denmark in the 1660s, with an English man named Robert Talbor creating and publicizing cinchona bark therapy [29]. British explorers were among the first to establish *Cinchona* plantations outside South America [30]. The Empire's colonial territories, such as India (particularly Darjeeling), Burma (Myanmar), and Java (Indonesia), provided ideal conditions for *Cinchona* cultivation, including favorable rainfall, tropical monsoon climate, rich soil, and abundant shade [31]. By 1922, when the British Empire reached its peak, occupying 25% of the world's land and ruling over 458 million people, it had the resources and reach to significantly impact global health [32]. The Empire's success in *Cinchona* cultivation was

remarkable. By 1918, British-controlled regions in Java and India produced over 98% of the world's Cinchona supply, with an annual production of 24,880,000 lb [33]. The mass production of Cinchona in British colonies made malaria treatment more widely available, potentially saving millions of lives [25]. Before the introduction of Cinchona-based treatments, people coped with malaria using various traditional methods, including limb amputation, purging, bloodletting, and herbal remedies, which were often ineffective [34].

However, it's important to note that the Empire's role in disease management was not without its complexities. The same colonial expansion that enabled the cultivation of Cinchona also contributed to the spread of diseases. The movement of people and goods across the Empire's vast territories often resulted in the introduction of new pathogens to populations with no prior immunity [35]. Moreover, the Empire's approach to disease management often reflected the racial and cultural biases of the time. Medical policies and practices in the colonies were frequently shaped by notions of European superiority and misconceptions about tropical diseases [36]. Despite these issues, the British Empire's efforts in cultivating Cinchona and distributing quinine represent a significant contribution to global health. The Empire's vast resources and administrative capabilities allowed for the large-scale production and distribution of a life-saving medication, demonstrating how imperial infrastructure could be leveraged for humanitarian purposes.

As we reflect on the British Empire's legacy in disease management, it's crucial to consider both the positive outcomes, such as the widespread availability of malaria treatment, and the problematic aspects of colonial medical practices. This nuanced understanding helps us appreciate the complex interplay between imperial power, scientific advancement, and global health in shaping our modern world.

6. Conclusion

The legacy of the British Empire is complex and multifaceted. While it is crucial to acknowledge and critically examine the Empire's role in perpetuating systems of exploitation and inequality, it is equally important to recognize its contributions to global development. The abolition of slavery, albeit after long participation in the trade, set a significant precedent for human rights. The Industrial Revolution, largely facilitated by British innovations and economic policies, laid the groundwork for modern technological and economic systems. Finally, the Empire's role in managing global diseases, exemplified by its efforts against malaria, demonstrates how imperial resources could be directed towards addressing global health challenges.

This analysis suggests that the impacts of the British Empire cannot be categorized as purely positive or negative. Instead, they represent a complex interplay of exploitation and progress, oppression and liberation. Future research could further explore these nuances, particularly in relation to the long-term effects of imperial policies on former colonies and global power structures. By critically examining these historical events, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the British Empire's role in shaping our modern world, informing current debates on global inequality, technological progress, and international health initiatives.

References

- [1] Kumar K. *Empires: A historical and political sociology*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020.
- [2] Burroughs P. John Robert Seeley and British Imperial History. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1973, 1 (2): 191 - 211.
- [3] Hamadi L. Edward Said: The postcolonial theory and the literature of decolonization. *European Scientific Journal*, 2014.
- [4] Ferguson N. *Empire: How Britain made the modern world*. Penguin UK, 2012.
- [5] Darwin J. *Unfinished empire: The global expansion of Britain*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012.
- [6] Williams E. Capitalism and slavery. In *Sociological Worlds*. Routledge, 2013: 260 - 268.

- [7] Ashton T S. The industrial revolution 1760-1830. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- [8] Hudson P. Regions and industries: a perspective on the industrial revolution in Britain. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- [9] Curtin P D. Cross-cultural trade in world history. Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- [10] Porter R. Disease, medicine and society in England, 1550-1860 (No. 3). Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- [11] Elkins C. Legacy of violence: A history of the British empire. Random House, 2022.
- [12] Nagarajan K V. The Code of Hammurabi: an economic interpretation. International journal of business and social science, 2011, 2 (8).
- [13] Blackburn R. The making of new world slavery: From the baroque to the modern, 1492 - 1800. Verso, 1997.
- [14] Araujo A L. Reparations for slavery and the slave trade: a transnational and comparative history. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023.
- [15] Coffey J. 'Tremble, Britannia!': Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758 – 1807. The English Historical Review, 2012, 127 (527): 844 - 881.
- [16] Dumas P E S. Defending the slave trade and slavery in Britain in the era of abolition, 1783 - 1833, 2013.
- [17] Sullivan A. Britain's War Against the Slave Trade: The Operations of the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron 1807–1867. Frontline Books, 2020.
- [18] Boehm K, Silberston A. British Patent System: Volume 1, Administration (Vol. 1). CUP Archive, 1967.
- [19] Fagerberg J, Fosaas M, Sapprasert K. Innovation: Exploring the knowledge base. Research policy, 2012, 41 (7): 1132 - 1153.
- [20] Rosen W. The most powerful idea in the world: A story of steam, industry, and invention. Random House, 2010.
- [21] Bruland K, Smith K. Assessing the role of steam power in the first industrial revolution: The early work of Nick von Tunzelmann. Research Policy, 2013, 42 (10): 1716 - 1723.
- [22] Hobsbawm E J. Industry and Empire: from 1750 to the Present Day. The new press, 1999.
- [23] Constable G, Somerville B. A century of innovation: Twenty engineering achievements that transformed our lives. Joseph Henry Press, 2003.
- [24] Engels F. The condition of the working class in England. Oxford University Press, USA, 1993.
- [25] Shah S. The fever: How malaria has ruled humankind for 500,000 years. Macmillan+ ORM, 2010.
- [26] Breman J G, Mills A, Snow R W, et al. Conquering malaria, 2011.
- [27] Veale L. An historical geography of the Nilgiri Cinchona plantations, 1860-1900. University of Nottingham, 2010.
- [28] Crawford M J. The Andean wonder drug: Cinchona bark and imperial science in the Spanish Atlantic, 1630-1800. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.
- [29] Klein W, Pieters T. The Hidden History of a Famous Drug: Tracing the Medical and Public Acculturation of Peruvian Bark in Early Modern Western Europe (c. 1650 – 1720). Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences, 2016, 71 (4): 400 - 421.
- [30] Williams D. Clements Robert Markham and the introduction of the cinchona tree into British India, 1861. The Geographical Journal, 1962, 128 (4): 431 - 442.
- [31] Besky S. The Darjeeling distinction: Labor and justice on fair-trade tea plantations in India (Vol. 47). Univ of California Press, 2014.
- [32] Johnson R, Khalid A. Public health in the British empire: intermediaries, subordinates, and the practice of public health, 1850 - 1960. Routledge, 2012.
- [33] Ballantyne T, Burton A. Empires and the Reach of the Global: 1870 – 1945. Harvard University Press, 2012.
- [34] Rooney A. The story of medicine. Arcturus Publishing, 2009.
- [35] Arnold D. Introduction: disease, medicine and empire. In The Rise and Fall of Modern Empires, Volume II. Routledge, 2016: 343 - 368.

[36] Vaughan M. Curing their ills: Colonial power and African illness. Stanford University Press, 1991.