

# A Review of the Theory of Free Trade Imperialism

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## Introduction

In this paper I would like to put into perspective the work of Professors John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson who, in 1953, published their well-known article entitled, "The Imperialism of Free Trade". Despite criticism from many recent historical writings this work has remained a major contribution to the study of imperial history.

I have arranged this paper in three main sections. First, a brief reference to the content of the Free Trade Imperialism theory and the principal criticism of it. Secondly, I shall discuss the reasons why I believe the theory has been so influential and discuss the ways in which the theory has assisted the study of imperial history, and also the ways in which, I believe, it has damaged this study. Thirdly, I shall explain my own ideas on the subject of free trade imperialism expressing my own criticisms and reservations.

## I

Briefly, Gallagher and Robinson stressed that there was continuity in British imperial expansion throughout the nineteenth century. They wrote that there was no period of anti-imperialism in the mid nineteenth century

as previous historians had believed, and they argued that there was no period of 'new imperialism' after 1880. Britain's expansion during the nineteenth century must be seen in the context of 'formal' and 'informal' empire: if possible British governments would control foreign countries by economic domination. Only if 'informal' empire proved to be unsuccessful would 'formal' annexation of territory occur.

Critics of this Free Trade Imperialism theory, led by Professor D. C. M. Platt, have argued that only after 1880 did British governments take an interest in British overseas trade and finance. Platt rejects the idea that the expansion of British trade in the world before 1880 led to the creation of an 'informal' empire.

## II

In my own view, Gallagher and Robinson must be given credit for originating a new area for historical study. Other historians have tried to apply the notion of informal empire to the expansion of all empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition, Gallagher and Robinson must be given credit for realizing that imperial expansion in the nineteenth century was not only the result of European political and economic developments. Local political and economic crises in Asia and Africa, too, could be important in drawing in the European powers.

But, after giving this credit to Gallagher and Robinson, I must also express three ways in which I believe the Free Trade Imperialism theory has hindered modern historical writing.

1) It has continued the futile search for one theory which can explain

imperialism.

2) It did not adequately use proper documentary sources as historical references and therefore has encouraged general debate only among modern historians.

3) The theory stresses continuity in Britain's imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, and yet it takes no account of the fact that Britain itself was not a constant or changeless society at this time. Revolutions in transport, in medicine, in military technology, and in British politics all greatly affected Britain's ability or inability to adopt 'formal' or 'informal' methods of control in different parts of the world. In other words, the choice between 'formal' and 'informal' empire may seem a logical one to historians in the twentieth century but it was by no means always available to British governments over 100 years before.

### III

My own views on Free Trade Imperialism may be summed up as follows: —

I do accept, in general terms, Gallagher and Robinson's idea of continuity in British expansion in the nineteenth century. But I would like to stress three reservations.

1) The idea I have just mentioned, that Britain itself was not a constant expansionary force at this time and that we must consider carefully what options were available to British governments at different times.

2) It is important not to project the values of the early twentieth century back into the early and mid nineteenth century. It is true that by the beginning of the twentieth century western Europeans believed that their civilisation was superior to that of all others and that an imperial

relationship with the rest of the world seemed the only one possible. But in the early and mid nineteenth century western European civilisation was frequently regarded as being only one among several world civilisations of roughly equal importance. Many British diplomats believed that several oriental societies had the potential to emerge as strong powers if only their economies and political systems could be modernised. The British, in the mid nineteenth century, therefore, did not simply see the rest of the world in terms of being either 'formal' or 'informal' empire as Gallagher and Robinson's theory seems to imply.

3) The relationship between economically strong nations and economically weak nations in the nineteenth century was not necessarily an imperial relationship. For the term 'imperialism' to be appropriate, in any form, there must be evidence of a conscious control of weaker economies for conscious political advantage.

My own opinion is that economic interests (trade and finance) did have a political importance throughout the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century and that, in this respect, Gallagher and Robinson's idea of continuity is a correct one. It is the geographical locations of the political crises which result from economic relations which alter. Trade and finance overseas sometimes had to be defended in order to preserve political standing and this was equally true in the mid nineteenth century as it was later.

### Conclusion

There are serious reservations about the value of theories to a proper study of economic and imperial relations between different nations in the

nineteenth century. Theories of imperialism have often led to greater confusion in historical writing than to greater clarity: they have given rise to speculation rather than a true understanding of international and imperial relationships. Nineteenth century imperial expansion will only be understood properly by the use of documentary evidence in careful research.

### Writings by Dr. D. A. McLean

#### Books :

- *Britain and Her Buffer State: the Collapse of the Persian Empire 1890-1924*, Royal Historical Society, London, 1979.
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