

By class of the  
nineteenth and early  
twentieth



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By the end of the 19th century, there was indeed much excitement and interest around the empire across the whole of society. Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, in 1897, was a spectacle celebrated with much pomp and grandeur that encapsulated some of the imperialistic fervour that was popular in the 1890s. 'Empire' was widely accepted among the ruling upper class of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, it was also a phenomenon that was widely supported at all levels of British society; evident in the public displays of ardour for empire leading to the Boer War in 1899. The Empire was often justified on moral grounds as a 'responsibility', a 'burden' that God had placed on the British in order to bring stability and order to the world; and sometimes on more liberal premises such as 'civilising' the colonial peoples, freeing them from local oppression and providing welfare and Christianity. The empire impacted the masses of British society on a tremendous scale, yet not as much as it did the small and powerful elite, who were the main economic beneficiaries of imperialism. Involved in financial markets and civil service affairs, the upper class profited most from the Empire but also provided the bulk of its administrators and supporters. For example, the Indian Civil Service recruited 76% of its personnel from "professional middle classes". The middle classes understood that the uppers should rule in ways they approved of and for ends they agreed upon, such as avoiding the obstruction of free market capitalism in Britain. However not all of the upper class were imperialists; industrial and capitalist middle classes of society received more joy in exploiting colonies for their own businesses rather than actually administrating them. The Second Industrial Revolution whetted the

bourgeoisie's hunger for new sources of profit from raw materials and new markets for the goods that would be manufactured from these resources.

In his *Imperialism: A Study*, John Atkinson Hobson argued that support for empire only grew because the bourgeoisie middle class of society wanted to invest in a source of cheap labour outside of their own home. By encouraging a policy of new imperialism and expansion, these individuals intended to establish new markets that would in turn stabilise the economy of their own country. As such, it can indeed be contended that support for empire was as much a bourgeoisie phenomenon than it was one of upper-class.

Furthermore, some upper class Victorians were not impressed by the "civic" argument that some races, such as the Indians, had to be governed by others for their own good. And so, it can actually be argued that support for the empire stemmed more from the middle class.

Nonetheless the nationalism that came with empire in this period of 'New Imperialism' no doubt stemmed from the upper class and became entrenched in every segment of British society. While the upper-middle classes may have used this notion as a means to legitimise their exploits, the belief in Britain as an imperial power with a moral duty to civilise the world became important to many Brits at home and in the colonies. Jingoistic attitudes and a nation-shared enthusiasm portrayed by the media no doubt demonstrates that Empire was not limited to the upper class.

Moreover, the zeal for an expansionist overseas policy shared by both the bourgeoisie and the working class masses is arguably what allowed the upper class of society to convince their governments to adopt an

imperialistic approach to further their own interests. Regardless of the military complications that came with administering colonies that were often liable to growing violent unpredictably, the public opinion led but not comprised of the upper elites of society is what compelled governments into taking pro-imperialistic action. Nationalism for empire became something reminiscent of a civic religion that was inherent in almost all newspapers and advertisements of the period; owned and directed by press and industrial tycoons. For example, an advertisement poster for Pears' Soap in 1899 suggests i further territory for the Empire. In the previous year, through concessions and successful treaties under his British South Africa Company, Rhodes came to control Zambezia. Even after his death in 1902, Rhodes' funds were used to publicise the Round Table Conference of 1910; once again promoting the consolidation of the Empire.

It is important to note that individuals such as Rhodes were so influential and prominent in the works of the empire only because they had the means and power to do so; subsequently much of the empire is in control of the small upper-class of society that possess these. Therefore, it is true to a large extent that empire itself was an upper-class phenomenon. To conclude, support for empire was to a large extent an upper-class phenomenon, or at the very least a society-wide phenomenon that was shaped and influenced by the upper-class. This is because Victorian middle classes by the late nineteenth century were not administrative imperialists, merely capitalists who wanted to benefit from the opportunities empire provided.

On the other hand, the upper class were those who took pride in ruling and administering colonies, all the while intent on the growth of the British

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Empire. Attitude towards empire didn't stem from exterior actions by British companies and organisations in Asia or Africa, but rather were home-grown ideologies rooted in the upper-middle classes' domestic that took shape in government and colonial policy. Although, David Cannadine addresses the reality that not all of the upper class were imperialists as such. The uppermost divisions of society would often avoid the practical work of imperialism or commerce, and instead saw interactions and visits to colonies as temporary "diversions".