

History of the english empire

[History](#), [Empires](#)



England Empire Colonies

In 1883, the British historian J. R. Seeley surveyed his nation's empire with bemusement: " We seem to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind." When you consider the various American empires before c. 1815, would you argue that they were acquired and maintained absentmindedly?

In his collection of lectures entitled 'The Expansion of England', J. R. Seeley exasperatingly stated that the creation and growth of the British empire had been met with " a fit of absence of mind." Seeley detailed the worrying trend amongst his contemporaries that the American colonies had not yielded sufficient profit for Britain, while the loss of the British American colonies had been as inevitable as the ripening of fruit.

This sentiment was inextricably linked to the fact that Britain had endowed its American colonies with liberty and representative government, while not obsessively exerting metropolitan authority; conducive factors to the American revolution. As Britain had lacked the explicit notion of conquest in determining her imperial project in North America, and was rather, and primarily, a commercial empire, the question as to whether the various imperial projects had been conducted in " absence of mind" is raised.

The fact that the British, French, and Dutch American empires were commercial ventures conducted by private individuals and companies to settle and procure profit from America, highlights the somewhat *ad hoc* maintenance of empire. However, to suggest that the foundation and

settlement of the various American empires was done in an exclusively non-purposeful manner - across the five centuries in which the continent was discovered, settled, and economically exploited - is problematic.

The sheer duration of the American empires puts to question how the various empires would have spanned centuries if they had been acquired and maintained absentmindedly. Further, in assessing the conquest of South America by the Spanish, an empire intrinsically founded on the spirit of the *conquistador* and mineral exploitation, the suggestion of 'absent-minded imperialism' is further put to question.

In addition to the problem of synthesising the various imperial missions under the questionable label of inattentiveness, there also lies the inherent issue that Seeley did not consciously intend to accuse the various American empires of governing with an "absence of mind". Thus, the issues raised by the duration and ideological differentiation of the American empires cloud any simple creation of a definitive conclusion as to how, and by whom, the empires were acquired and maintained.

From the foundation of the first British colony at Jamestown in 1606 to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the British American empire to which Seeley referred to had spanned one-hundred and seventy years. This colonial longevity implicitly puts to question the sign of an absent-minded empire. Although there was no singular, cohesive force which settled, economically-exploited, and governed the American empires, there was purpose to be found in all the imperial projects.

The fact that there was not one, but several, interwoven missions with different intentions and outcomes obscures the purposeful nature of the imperial projects. However, the very inception of the American empires clearly displayed purpose. In the royal charters granted by Elizabeth I and Henry VII, explorers such as Sir Walter Raleigh were given prerogatives to locate and conquer suitable areas of the New World for English possession. The creation of colonies had a two-fold purpose; to emulate the economic success of Spain and create new areas of commerce and agricultural produce for England.

Indeed, not only were royal charters granted by European monarchs to explorers seeking to claim and settle the Americas, but they were also granted to trading companies. This delegation of power showed pragmatic solutions to the acquisition of the virgin American markets. As the British, French, and Dutch states did not have enough capital to run the risk of acquiring new land, it was the purpose of companies such as the Plymouth and London groups to settle New England and the Chesapeake and to create agricultural produce and symbiotic trading agreements with the natives present there.

Therefore, the control exerted by the private companies in the American empires should not suggest absent-mindedness on behalf of the mother countries, but rather, a practical measure to maximise profit and minimise investment in an untested and perhaps ruinous scheme.

In describing the "absence of mind" of the British state, Seeley highlighted the issue of reluctant British imperialism and that this reluctance led to

imperial disorganisation, which ultimately epitomised the absence of mind which he aimed to identify.

However, this was not a direct attack on the commercial nature of the American colonies, but rather Seeley aimed to highlight a lack of a cohesive imperial identity which primarily referred to Britain's Indian empire. Seeley states quite openly that “ our acquisition of India was made blindly” while “ when our first settlers went out to Virginia and New England... We did intend to establish a new community”.

Thus, by first allowing private investors to settle and acquire an economic base in America, followed by a direct application of metropolitan control when the colonies began to prosper, the British state had indeed acquired and maintained her commercial empire with purpose.

The beneficial economic motives which led to the granting of a royal charter for Jamestown in 1606 resulted in the eventual - if tortuous - prosperity of the colony; identifying the commercial purpose of the British American empire. Even though it took several decades for Jamestown to prosper and be fully recognised by metropolitan authority in England may suggest a tenuous link for imperial purpose and direct control.

But, by the seventeenth century, the British state had created the Navigation Act of 1660 which sought to consolidate previous economic regulations and ultimately, make trade more prosperous for England. By stating that no goods could be imported or exported into territories owned by Charles II,

unless carried in English vessels, ensured the commercial hegemony of England in her American colonies.

This coherent economic regulation, legislated just fifty-four years after the foundation of Jamestown, testifies to a purposeful maintenance of Britain's commercial empire.

Furthermore, the power of the British metropole, epitomised in the increased regulatory interference in the post-Seven Years' War climate shows further purposeful maintenance of the American colonies. After Britain had curtailed French and Spanish power in North America, the British state aimed to apply the dictates of a centrally-based parliament, obsessed with the concept of sovereignty.

This ideological shift primarily resulted from the altered power structure created in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War. Due to a British sentiment that the colonies had defiantly 'dragged their feet' during the course of the war combined with the fact that Britain defeated its imperial rivals - in course becoming a hegemonic force in North America - created a perceptible power shift. In creating a monopoly of power, the economic and political status of colonists and Indians worsened, culminating in Pontiac's rebellion and the subsequent grievances and retaliations of white settlers, such as the Paxton Boys, placing Britain in an unprecedented situation.

In response to the increasing frontier disputes, growing prejudices between settlers and Native Americans, and the changed power-structure present after the Seven Years' War, the metropolitan became increasingly

authoritative in colonial legislation. Parliamentary revenue acts were enacted to pay for a ten-thousand strong land army to maintain authority in the colonies; the Royal Proclamation of 1763 aimed to reinforce the Crown's control of new colonies in North America , while the Stamp Act of 1765 attempted to apply direct taxation to the American colonies.

This shift in metropolitan attitude, following the Seven Years' War, was to become significant in the colonial grievances leading up to the Declaration of Independence while showing direct evidence of the purposeful governance of the Britain's American empire.

Nevertheless, the assertion that the American empires were acquired and maintained absentmindedly is not baseless, and can be persuasively attributed to the 'commercial empires' of North America. The limited design and short-sighted nature of the various imperial projects is especially evident in the creation of some of the first American colonies in the early seventeenth century.

The initial setbacks of the English colonies at Roanoke - which completely vanished - and Jamestown, which witnessed continual deprivation and ruinous warfare against the Powhattan empire to the similar failure of Cartier's French colonies shows the limited design and purpose behind the formative American colonies. The fact that such ventures failed for simple, and surmountable, reasons such as lack of supply and poor location and suffered initial, and unnecessary, setbacks in declaring war against Native Americans, showed that the American empires, from the very beginning, had limited success and little central control.

In essence, Jamestown was not the centre of metropolitan attention, most of its initial settlers quickly died, and by 1622 the Virginia Company was close to bankruptcy. Indeed, the sixteenth and seventeenth century French and English explorers and settlers initially sought the lucrative promise of Gold and Silver akin to the Spanish discovery and exploitation in South America.

Explorers such as Raleigh and Cartier became obsessed with the acquisition of precious metals in a vain attempt to match the prosperity of the Spanish empire. Therefore the English and French colonies, following the absence of a codified plan, essentially stumbled, 'half-reluctantly, upon their system of agricultural produce and commerce , *in lieu* of Gold.

Moreover, the criticism applied to the absent-minded metropole in the foundation of the American colonies can be further applied to the *ad hoc* maintenance of the American empire. Since private companies and individuals had been in control of colonial affairs in varying senses and had been granted differing vested powers, the maintenance of metropolitan authority was not cohesive.

Effective metropolitan control was not in place until the radically altered political structure following the Seven Years' War in America. Indeed, rather than the Seven Years' War being perceived as a prime example of purposeful metropolitan maintenance of an economic and political empire, it was the increase in metropolitan authority after 1763 which highlighted previous absent-mindedness regarding America.

Until the latter half of the eighteenth century, metropolitan authority had been a secondary premise behind the commercial nature of the American empire, which was founded not on exploitation, but the granting of political freedoms, liberty, and local representation.

Given the general perception that the British, French and Dutch empires began ignominiously in the seventeenth century, while the respective States ruled their mercantilist empires with a *laissez-faire* attitude, it would seem apt to label their imperial experiences as absent-minded. However, despite the initial setbacks in America, each of the American empires did aim to settle and govern their colonies in the best interest of commerce.

Trade was the pre-eminent motive for the investors of the Virginia company, while specific instructions were given to prospective colonists of Jamestown to maximise productivity. Further, the nature of French imperialism in North America shown in the system of trading posts on the St. Lawrence and Mississippi River, epitomises the commercial presence of the European powers in America. In presiding over a large portion of sparsely populated land the French sought to create a monopoly of trade with the Native Americans without impinging on territory or imposing a large army; their empire was built on a trade relationship in which both the French traders and state, as well as the natives, benefited.

Further, in the small colonies of the New Netherlands and New Sweden, army deployment and state control was similarly weak, creating the perfect environment for lucrative trade. Indeed, a recurring theme in Shorto's depiction of the New Netherlands was the realisation made by explorers and

governors that the Dutch colony was situated in an optimum location for the control of trade along the seaboard and into the American interior. This proved that it was the identification and exploitation, through colonisation, of prosperous economic regions which was important to European imperial regimes; suggesting a purposeful maintenance of the commercial North American empires.

The argument for absent-minded imperialism further falls apart when applied to the Spanish style of empire employed in South America. The Spanish state, while recognising the commercial benefits of the South American colonies, acquired and maintained her empire purposefully.

Inspired by the legitimisation to New World conquest granted by the Alexandrine Bulls and through the use of the *requerimiento*, the Spanish pursued an empire of conquest intent on the subjugation of the native peoples, exploitation of bullion, and the evangelisation of the native population.

By conquering the Aztec and Mayan empires in the sixteenth century and exploiting abundant gold and silver deposits, the South American Spanish Viceroyalties were intrinsically founded on the 'Spirit of Conquest' with an aim to increase Spanish power via the importation of bullion. The Spanish thus used the plunder and mineral deposits of South America as a means to increase their power in Europe and to consolidate their position in the Americas.

Furthermore, the central nature of this debate, that of Seeley's bemusement at the imperial 'absence of mind' in America, has had its original intention taken out of context. Seeley saw the American empire as an integral part of 'Greater Britain' which had been unfairly neglected by British historians.

By declaring that the "absence of mind", Seeley was referring to the fact that Britain's imperial project in America had failed to alter British perceptions of Great Britain, that it had failed to "change our ways of thinking" and that "we do not reckon our colonies as really belonging to us". Thus the "absence of mind" was not directed at the acquisition and maintenance of empire, but rather at the "indifference which we show towards the mighty phenomenon of the diffusion of our race and the expansion of our state."

To conclude, the declaration that the American empires were acquired and maintained with a complete absence of mind is incorrect. Each European imperial project had differing intentions, were settled by different individuals and spanned across centuries, and so a sense of continued purpose was inevitably lost. But there was, of course, purpose behind the imperial projects, or they would not have been settled or economically exploited in the first place.

Both France and England settled in America for commercial interests while the Spanish purposefully exploited the economic wealth of South America. Further, the importance of questioning J. R. Seeley's quote cannot be understated. He was not necessarily accusing Britain of an 'absence of mind' in regards to America, but rather in a historical sense; that the greatness of

the imperial schemes had be ignored, and a re-assessment of the importance and centrality it held to British history must be made.

Bibliography

Appelbaum, Robert (ed.) *Envisioning an English Empire: Jamestown and the Making of the North Atlantic World* (2005).

Armitage, David, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000).

Elliott, John, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830* (New Haven, 2006).

The Old World and the New, 1492-1650 (Cambridge, 1970).

Games, Alison, *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 1999).

Pagden, Anthony, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500 - 1800* (New Haven, 1995).

Richter, Daniel, *Facing East from Indian Country* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

Samson, Jane (ed.) *The British Empire* (Oxford, 2001).

Seed, Patricia, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's conquest of the New World, 1492 - 1640* (Cambridge, 1995).

Seeley, J. R., *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883).

'A Declaration and Remonstrance of the Distressed and Bleeding Frontier
Inhabitants of the Province of Pennsylvania' (Philadelphia, 1764)