

British trade between 1783 and the 1850s history essay



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The eighteenth century witnessed many important developments. The consolidation of the British Empire dates back to this period, but, even more astounding than that was the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. These two factors together; industrialization and colonization proved to be a natural force that pushed the boundaries of the British Empire to the four corners of the world and positioned Britain as one of the wealthiest, prosperous and advanced countries of the time. The mass-production of manufacture resulting from industrialization soon transformed Britain into an export led economy. During this time span of about 70 years, two major outbreaks in British trade occurred. One covered the years between 1783 up until the 1800 and the later growth in trade, took place around the mid-nineteenth century. However, in the years between these two periods 1805-1842 Britain, somewhat, experiences stagnation.

There were basically two main causes to which we can trace the origins of this growth in trade. First and foremost Britain was the first nation to undergo Industrialization. Secondly, Britain had acquired several strategically important colonies; she had the strongest colonial empire in Europe. "... A European overseas world dominated by Britain." [1]

The first period of growth trade, paralleled in time to the Second British Empire. And this is no mere coincidence for the colonies played a very much important and crucial role in triggering and driving British international trade. By the mid-nineteenth century, Great Britain was already the greatest colonial power in the world with bases or territories in all continents. The French empire had lost most of its colonies in the Seven Years' war and Napoleonic wars. The Spanish Empire was dying out, most of her Spanish

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colonies had gotten or demanded their independence; the only surviving empire was that of the Dutch but was greatly weakened by 1815. It was in fact, at the close of the eighteenth century that the second phase of British imperialism began. The rivalry over the attainment of the colonies outpoured in several wars throughout the 1700s; the Anglo-Dutch wars and the Seven Years' War. Britain was the breadwinner in both instances, winning over many new territories in the East and even more importantly, had managed to drive away once and for all the French off North America in particular Canada.

Apart from that, Britain had also secured her influence and predominance over India through the Carnatic Wars. And as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, according to the Treaty of Paris, Britain won several overseas colonies being the victor. These newly acquired lands consisted of the Cape in Africa; Ceylon near India; Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago in the West Indies; Helgoland in the North Sea and Malta in Mediterranean.[2] Basically she had colonies in every part of the world America, Africa, Australasia; North-South, East-West. " With a collateral increase in British commercial power through the new conquests, Britain would become dominant in both naval power and overseas trade for many years to come." [3] But apart from this, most importantly, she had confirmed her ties with India her most precious colony of all.

" Most of this [overseas] trade was monopolized by Britain, whose superior naval power gave her open door to it. Her foreign export trade trembled between 1789 and 1815 and after 1815 her trade tended to become more and more predominantly a maritime, overseas trade" [4]

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Much of the obstacles to trade had completely vanished. Having so many territories under her hands meant that Britain could freely trade and make use of her colonies as much as she pleased. It involved a whole cycle; Britain got raw materials and primary goods from her colonies e. g. cotton, gold, tea, sugar. Products would then be manufactured in the British industries and factories, and, in turn were sold to her colonies and in Europe e. g. Lancashire cotton. “ So, until at least the 1860s, Britain enjoyed an easy economic supremacy as against her most serious continental rivals.”[5] However, it was also the leading country in re-export trade, as in, certain goods like sugar and tobacco that were imported into Britain were partly retained for home consumption and partly exported.

So, her colonies not only proved to be great sources of supply but as well of demand. This was best seen in time of war, when during the Napoleonic Era- Napoleon issued the Continental system, it was in her colonies that Britain found refuge. For up until that time, Europe was Britain’s greatest market both for imports and exports. And, even though, smuggling was at its fore at this time, so that, British goods still managed to seep through into Europe. Nonetheless, Britain was affected badly; in fact, it was around the same time that British trade experienced a relative stagnation. Of course, Britain had also found new markets in South America, in the Near East, and in the Baltic where to sell her products and more British imports were being sold in Indian markets to make-up for the absence of European markets. “ Indeed, fears about Napoleon helped to drive a British forward policy in India, and the success of this policy made Britain the dominant power there and, more generally, in south Asia.”[6]

“ British trade could survive so long as the other continents of the world were open to it.”[7]

As, Peter Mathias had stated, Britain was the ‘ first industrial nation’, and sooner than later became “ the unchallenged “ workshop of the world”.[8]

The change from home based workshops into factories meant that much more goods were being fabricated and manufactured. This led to the creation of a surplus in manufactured wares. These extra goods were then being exported outside of the country, sold off into overseas markets. And as production was becoming more efficient, more of a surplus was being created. This stimulated the growth of exportations. In turn, as new colonies and territories were gradually added to the British Empire, new markets were opened up for British manufactured goods. On the other hand, like wise, Britain needed more and more primary products firstly to meet the needs of the workers (growing population) and secondly raw materials like cotton for her industries. Colonies were a very cheap way of obtaining resources. Her colonies absorbed a great proportion of British exports.

Another sector in which Britain flourished, adding up to this growth in trade was, that of re-exportation especially of sugar, tobacco and tea. These products were very popular amongst the Europeans so once these goods got the mother country a great proportion was shipped to be sold off.

The import and exports as we have seen start playing quite an important part in the economy.

The local producers suffered quite significantly when the textile manufactured goods export increased, for the mass-produced cheap wares were more negotiable on the markets, than the hand-made expensive ones. “ This happened with British cotton textiles and Indian calicoes during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, though on balance in Britain at this time led to a net increase in the volume of cotton goods traded internationally.”[9]

Indeed a periphery starts taking shape around Britain. “ The first British Empire, bound by laws of trade, was a self-sufficient and expanding economy enriching its centre, surely, but also its periphery.[10]Whole communities were borne. Britain invested a lot in these periphery countries because of the great demand Britain had for primary products for her. British imports, costed more than the profits made off manufactured exported goods So, funding the building of railway lines, mines and ports meant that the resources could reach Britain quicker and cheaper. “[The English cotton industry] such industries, together with the employment and profits they generated, would have been inconceivable without an assured supply of raw materials from Asia and the Americas.”[11]More over, the invisible goods; the services- insurances, shipping, generated a lot of income.

The populations of Canada and North America in general, Australia, New Zealand and India in general were expanding. Many people were migrating there in promise of a better life and jobs. More over, a lot of workers and expertise were sent there on projects of railways constructions. So, consequently, the markets were expanding further more, capable of absorbing more and more British products.

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So, as I have discussed, the growth of trade proved to be a trigger to many other things. Britain and her colonies became intertwined in complicated networks of trade, upon which the British economy depended, as a result of which a periphery sprang up around her. Britain relied less on agriculture as a generator of incomes and more on exports. New markets were inserted into these tangled trade networks shifting the importance of British trade away of Europe to other regions of recent settlement namely the United States. Britain by the mid-nineteenth century established itself as the workshop of the world and its commercial power predominated. “ Britain’s dominance of the nineteenth-century world was one of the major legacies of the period of international relations”[12]