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Turning points in British Empire History

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motto"Audax et cautus"1926 Apr 20 "B"1st Prize

The greatest and most universal factor for the preservation of peace and sanity to-day, and the sole hope of a world overwhelmed by a chaotic sea of social disorder and unrest, is the British Empire. To the great sisterhood of free states must the eyes of the peoples of the world ever be turned for an example and an encouragement in the maintenance of a stable, just and beneficial system of government, as always in a crisis men have turned to what they know to be the highest guiding and promoting force; and for such a course of procedure there is surely a sufficient precedent in the policy of Britain at all the great turning-points in her Empire's past history. Of necessity, there must, in the years that have gone to the formation of so great a sovereignty, arisen times which ~~have~~ called for great decisions and still greater steadfastness to declared resolutions, and the mighty British Empire to-day, prosperous and self-contained, linked by the chains of common interests among the dependencies and national pride of race, is a standing witness to the wisdom and far-sightedness of the statesmen of England at such times of universal disturbance.

Invariably, in the history of a great nation, occur times that are fraught with consequences for the destiny of that people, ~~& in~~ the intervals of time between such crises may be compared to the long stretches of dusty highway that lie between the milestones, but whereas the milestones appear

with unfailing regularity, turning-points in the nation's story obey no such fixed laws, and often differ considerably themselves. One such point may come as a bolt from the blue, over before its arrival has been completely recognised, ^{another,} ~~others~~ again, may occupy long spaces of years in gradual development that is discernable only ^{with the aid of} ~~through~~ the perspective of distance. Such is the first great stage in the history of the British Empire.

The awakening idea of empire expansion and overseas dominion was the outcome of the hundred and twenty years when the Tudors ruled England, a time when Spain, with the help of the untold wealth of the continent but newly discovered by Columbus, was rapidly becoming the richest and most powerful nation of Europe. There was the time when the love of the sea, that had been the heritage of every Englishman since the days of Alfred the Great, blossomed out into that great and mighty thing that was in great measure responsible for the first formation of an overseas Empire. The national hatred against Spain, inflamed and augmented by the religious rancour of the times and the fact that Englishmen were unable to share in the rich plunder of America, over which Spain claimed a monopoly, broke out in a sea warfare that robbed her of much of her precious plunder and, by creating ~~a~~ an incentive to wider voyaging, first brought before common notice the advantages of colonial expansion.

This, then, was the time when the first glimmerings of empire expansion were manifested in the dreams and plans of such men as Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Humphrey Gilbert. Then went Chancellor to Archangel, Frobisher to

Labrador, Davis to the North-west passage, ~~Haw~~ Hawkins and Drake on their many plundering and buccaneering expeditions — all the foremost men of the day entering into the spirit of expansion; and it was in the spacious days of Elizabeth that the first attempts at overseas settlement were made. Gilbert failed at Newfoundland, Raleigh, that true Empire-builder, at Virginia, but the first divergence from the mainroad of the insular policy of development had taken place, and henceforward the story becomes that of the British Empire rather than that of Britain herself.

After these first steps had been taken the external growth of the English nation continued, more soberly and seriously. No picturesque characters such as Raleigh, but powerful merchants and grave religious companies took up the business of colonisation, and these succeeded where he had failed. The whole period was one of experiment, but the first fruits were tasted when the colonies in the west at Virginia, New Plymouth and Maryland were permanently settled. And in the meanwhile colonisation in the east had been steadily proceeding. After the first voyages of Drake and Lancaster and the formation of the East India Company, voyages occurred regularly and trading-posts and factories were set up, despite the competition of Dutch and Portuguese. Thus expansion was slowly beginning both in the east and the west, and this gradual increase in colonisation, particularly amongst the East Indies, leads up to the next step in the Empire's history.

This may be named as the Navigation Act of 1651, the direct consequence of which was the first Dutch war.

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Spain, her power already crumbling, was a thing of the past, and Britain entered upon her second great era of competition with a new enemy and one closer to home — the Dutch. The three Dutch wars, together with the vigorous colonisation of Cromwell, who had already been responsible for the most important British possession in the West Indies — Jamaica — did much to raise the Empire to a higher position than it had ever reached before.

With the restoration of 1660 came the policy of the Stuart régime again, and though there is much fault to be found in the reign of Charles II, (and James II) it had, at the least in the first years of its existence, points worthy of respect in its foreign administration; namely, a keen interest in colonial expansion, and notions of trade and defence. However, from this time till well on in the 18th cent little save steady and remorseless growth marks the progress of the Empire. The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, closing the French war, left England in an extremely gratifying position, with more dominions under her flag and her sea-supremacy indisputably asserted.

There now comes another and most critical period in the Empire's history — yet one more landmark beside the way of progress. This is the turning from expansion by settlement to expansion by conquest, a stage which occupies some thirty years, a succession of wars arising directly out of the determination to extend or to preserve British trade and sovereignty beyond the seas. The first of these wars is with Spain for a share in the Spanish-American trade, from which developed a war

with France and Spain allied against Britain. It is of no great consequence in itself, but is important in that it led to an ever-increasing hostility with France, the new rival in Empire expansion. Spain, Holland and Portugal ^{had} passed - France was now to become England's chief enemy. There was incessant warfare with the Indians, many parties under French leadership, in the American colonies. Braddock's defeat, in 1755, had a great effect, and the number of Indian raids was greatly increased. The English efforts against the French were repulsed, and it was not until June, 1757, when Pitt's ministry became firmly established, that the American conflict became a national war. Troops, equipment and money were forthcoming. The tide turned, and British success followed success with great rapidity. In 1759 came the capture of Quebec, a glorious story of heroism and endurance that is only saddened by the death of Wolfe. Thus Canada passed into English hands.

Simultaneously with the trouble in America had come ^{disturbance} ~~trouble~~ in India. The original French East India Company had been merely a trading corporation, and as such had set up many factories and settlements, abstaining, however, from interference in native politics. With the advent of Dupleix as French governor, his ambitions soared to higher ideals, and he visualised a great French Indian Empire; throughout his whole term of office he shaped his administration to this end. The weak link in his chain of conceptions, however, was the fact that a dominant ^{European} nation in India must, in order to preserve her position, have supreme control of the seas, a possession that had been England's

alone ever since the Treaty of Utrecht. Actual war between England and France was declared in 1744, and as the peace of 1748 was ~~but~~ negligible in its effect upon the actual combatants, it is best to consider a period of active warfare from the former date right on to the Treaty of Paris in 1763. The awakening of the English in India to the necessity of meeting the French with their own weapons took place about 1750, as a result of the effects of Duplex's unchecked influence in the Carnatic. Soon, however, Duplex was recalled, and though Bussy attempted to carry on his ideals by an alliance with the Nizam, the arrival of Lally with French troops indicated an impending conflict between the two white races, and the Nizam, believing the British to be stronger, threw in his lot with them. Clive and Coote, at the head of British forces, gained a succession of victories, and Lally was besieged at Pondicherry and forced to surrender. Thus the military power of France in India ceased to exist.

As a result of the French wars Britain had ~~now~~ greatly extended her territories, resources and wealth, and was now, in her accepted position of mistress of the seas, a nation whose chief interests and prospects of growth lay in the New World, and not in the continent as formerly. Now comes a happening, however, that was to prove as a very real blow to her imperial pride — namely, the loss of the American Colonies. Whether this was a good or a bad thing for the British Empire has been a point of controversy for many years; but although it entailed the loss of so many valuable and hard-won possessions, it is certain that it was in some ways the salvation of

the Empire, for it brought vividly home to the statesmen in England the inadequacy and unfairness of the existing system of colonial government. Various stages led up to the Declaration of Independence, and though much of the blame is assumedly due to the gross ignorance and misunderstanding of the people in the old country, the colonies themselves should come in for a share of criticism. Nevertheless, the severance from England and the American War which followed were pregnant with consequences both for England and America. The entrance of France into the war on the side of the independents showed that her hopes of an Empire to rival Britain's were not yet abandoned, and, after the failure of British troops on land, both Spain and France joined America in an attempt upon the sea-supremacy of England. Unprepared though she was, Britain took up the challenge, and apart from the crucial successes of ~~the~~ De Grasse at Yorktown, the honours rested with her after Rodney's great victory off St. Vincent. So she was able to secure favourable, though humiliating, terms at the Peace of Versailles.

So then, at the end of the 18th cent., Britain's two great foreign possessions were Canada and India. Soon, however, public attention was to be drawn to further possibilities of expansion. The report of Captain Cook, the first navigator to thoroughly explore and investigate the possibilities of the practically unknown "Great South Land," opened before the eyes of the home government an opportunity both to replace the lost colonies in America and to supply a dumping-ground for the surplus convict population that England herself might no longer hold. Such was the inauspicious beginning of Australia, soon, however, it was seen that the new country was worthy of better things.

Samples of Australian-grown wool sent to England were found to compare favourably with the best European fleeces, and the opening-up of great territories of good grazing land beyond the coastal mountains brought thousands of immigrants to Australia's distant shores. Thus the new land steadily grew, and with it New Zealand, fortunately favoured by a more promising start. The great landmark in the history of these southern dependencies occurred about the middle of the 19th century, when the discovery of gold became generally known, and miners flocked from all parts of the world to try their fortune in the ~~new~~ new country. And after the first few years of frantic prospecting had passed, and the gold-producing industry of Australia had subsided to but a minor position in that country's resources, the island continent, with various other possessions in the Pacific, assumed its present position as a member of the great British Empire.

All this while the Empire had been extending in all parts of the world. Possessions in Africa, in the Indies, and many isolated colonies had drifted under the British flag. Several minor crises had made their appearance, but the Empire was now so mighty and universal, a unit as to be shaken by nothing short of a world-disturbance. So the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 did little save bear out the lesson of the loss of the American colonies — how well Britain had learnt that lesson was shown by the granting of self-government to many of her young dominions —, and bring more experience to the statesmen of the Empire. Similarly the South African war is noteworthy mainly for the wonderful spirit and patriotism of the men from overseas, showing that the dominions were ever ready to rally round the standard of

the motherland in her time of need. This ardent fervour of ^{loyalty.} ~~loyalism~~ is still better exemplified by their conduct in the Great War — an event too vividly before men to-day to require description. Suffice it to say that the Empire, as she had done many times in the past, weathered the storm of conflict, and emerged a more closely-bound whole than ~~even~~ before.

Thus the great story ends, in so far as the past centuries are concerned. What the years to come may hold, none can foretell; yet, ^{though} ~~as~~ we are sure that critical periods will arise in the Empire's future history, and that their effects will be ^{has seen,} greater, and more far-reaching than any in the past, we confidently rest assured that, whatever the emergency, England and the Empire will meet and overcome it, fortified and encouraged by the example of the past.

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