

Continental Europe and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire

Relevant to

Modules on Britain in the eighteenth century; British Empire

Background

The origins of the British Empire lie as far back as the sixteenth century, when England began to establish overseas possession. With the Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland in 1707 to form Great Britain, we can talk of the birth of the “first British Empire”. In this period, Britain had imperial possessions and interests in parts of north America, the West Indies and south Asia. France was Britain’s foremost imperial rival until the end of the Seven Years War of 1756-1763, when France had to cede much of its imperial holdings to Britain. Britain was established as the world’s foremost maritime power.

With the American War of Independence, however, between 1775 and 1783, Britain lost control of the thirteen colonies which broke away to form the new United States of America. 1783 is often the moment identified by historians as the beginning of the “second British Empire.” New colonies were founded in Australia and New Zealand. But though the United States was no longer part of the British Empire, it transpired that trade with the newly independent country remained substantial in this period.

It has often been suggested that in the second half of the eighteenth century Britain became more nationally and imperially conscious and that the Empire was seen as a great national project. In this 2013 lecture, Professor Stephen Conway challenges that interpretation, asking what contribution Europeans made to the British Empire in the eighteenth century:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_lXCDmrls.

Questions

- In what ways did continental European fund the expansion of the British Empire?
- To what extent did continental European commodities penetrate the markets of the British Empire? How did the British government’s approach to continental European commodities in imperial markets change over time?
- What contributions did continental European *people* make to the British Empire, and which group does Professor Conway see as making the most significant contribution?
- Professor Conway suggests that governments were more hostile to continental European commodities penetrating the British Empire than they were to continental European *people*. Why was this?
- How should we conceptualise ‘mercantilism’?
- Was the Empire a ‘great national project’ in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Further resources

Read the British Museum’s introduction to the expansion of the British Empire in the eighteenth century, with images from maps, books, pamphlets and documents held in the library’s collection, here: <https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/travel-trade-and-the-expansion-of-empire>.