HISTORICAL PROFILES / United Kingdom

The United Kingdom at home

The Kingdom of Great Britain comes into being under the Treaty of Union of the kingdoms of England (which then included Wales) and Scotland on 1 May 1707. A Treaty of Union then unites the kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801. The Great Famine of 1845–52 is contributory to the formation of the Irish Free State comprising the twenty-six southern counties of Ireland that vote to secede from the United Kingdom in 1922. The six counties of Northern Ireland, however, vote to remain as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.



Articles of Union between England and Scotland, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/6/106/2307

London, http://www.parliament.uk/archives



An Act for the Union of Great Britain and Ireland, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1800/39&40G3n241

London, http://www.parliament.uk/archives

The shadow of India

Between 1815 and 1922, the United Kingdom, consisting of England, Wales, Scotland and the whole of Ireland, is a successful industrial nation slowly shuffling towards democracy. During the century, Britain accumulates overseas territories in all continents, but authority is delegated to those countries where white settlers dominate – Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Britain's principal Asian interest is the Indian Empire, built up by private initiative. This interest shadows attitudes toward the Arab world and the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Victorian experts in the Middle East – many of whom have knowledge of Islam and the Turkish and Arabic languages, like Richard Burton – come to these studies from India and familiarity with Persia. Strategists during this period debate whether the Ottoman Empire should or should not be upheld as a bulwark against an expanding Russia, seen also as a threat to Indian possessions. There have been long-standing commercial interests, mostly based in Constantinople (Istanbul), Smyrna (Izmir) and Aleppo. These markets channel imports from farther east. The development of steam power brings the eastern Mediterranean world closer to Britain; over the century, fuelling stations – Aden, Cyprus, Egypt – are acquired, facilitating routes to India, especially after the Suez Canal is opened in 1869.



Sketches of Aden

1848



The Route of the Overland mail to India; Aden

c. 1850-1852



Robert Hamilton Lang

1860s



Kurds charging, with Kettle-drummers leading, from the book Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia

1856 (publication of the book)

Alliances and cultural exchanges

Britain’s main interest is not territorial control but commercial influence and security of the routes to India. The Indian Empire, which grows through treaties with ruling potentates, makes Ottoman strategists fearful of a creeping British (and French) colonialism. The Indian pattern is replicated in the Gulf, with treaties made with local rulers leaving local matters to them, but demanding a monopoly on external relations and defence. British and Ottoman interests converge in the 1850s when Britain (and France) become the Ottoman Empire’s ally in the Crimean War, in the latter’s latest war against an expansive Russia. The increase in travel to the Ottoman capital, Constantinople, fuels a brief enthusiasm for all things Turkish – fashion, art, bathing and tobacco. Ottoman fears of encroachment are confirmed by the British take-over of Egypt in 1882 as well as France’s expansion in Algeria and Tunisia. When the Ottoman Empire declares it is bankrupt in the 1870s, Britain stands as guarantor for the debt, only adding to Ottoman fears. British visitors stimulate a growing enthusiasm for travel literature, and fuel an interest in the classical sites of Asia Minor. Christians promote biblical archaeology, and missionary work expands in the Levant.



Map of the Red Sea

1883



The Turkish Court; Recollections of the Great Exhibition, 1851

1851



An image from the book Eastern Hospitals and English Nurses

1857



View on the Jordan

1893

End of empires

British control of Egypt is indirect. Absolute authority is wielded through the Consul General, theoretically a junior diplomat, whose superior is the British Ambassador in Constantinople. The latter decides on the detail of the country’s budget and British officials have unchallenged authority as advisors, although all nominal Ministers are Egyptian. Egypt becomes part of the European economic system. The Suez Canal, managed by an Anglo-French company, is a British imperial interest. Cairo becomes a feature of the western

European, but mainly British, social season. Thomas Cook organises tours every winter for the middle classes to Upper Egypt and all the senior officers of the Egyptian army are British. Local discontent is crushed and nationalists are exiled to other parts of the British Empire. The Ottoman Empire is an ally of Britain’s enemy, Germany, in World War I and so Egypt is declared a British protectorate. The Ottoman Empire is unexpectedly resilient in the war. A confused and uncoordinated British Government, preoccupied principally by the war in western Europe, makes irreconcilable commitments in the Levant, promising independence with one hand but withholding it with the other, and also responding to Zionist pressure to support a Jewish national home in Palestine.



Bronze medal celebrating the Suez Canal

1869