

## HEIGHT OF EMPIRE—ERA SUMMARY

### BRITISH EMPIRE—1815 TO 1902

#### END OF NAPOLEONIC WARS TO SECOND BOER WAR

The years following the [Napoleonic Wars](#) were beset by domestic difficulties in Britain. The government had to raise taxes to pay off a massive war debt, and unemployment was a much greater problem than during the war time. Numerous domestic reforms had been put off during the war and the industrial revolution was wreaking havoc on traditional economies. Because of the shifting of wealth from the countryside to the cities there was a great deal of pressure to reform Parliament in order to more fairly represent newly populated areas. This resulted in the Reform Act of 1832, which enfranchised thousands of middle class citizens and better represented the new distribution of population. Other important reforms that were implemented after the war years were Catholic emancipation and the abolition of slavery in the colonies.

**Victorian Era**—The Victorian Era, lasting from 1837 to the close of the 19th century, was the heyday of the British Empire. The population of all of its colonies increased greatly during this time, both from indigenous growth, and the migration of Britain's own growing population. Land in Canada, Australia, and South Africa was cheap and any landless Englishman who could afford passage, could become established in the new colonies. Manufactured goods were becoming inexpensive, trade thrived, and a reasonably prosperous middle class was becoming a predominant political power for the first time in history. Rail travel was becoming widely available, making transportation to, and development of the interior regions of both Britain and its colonies much easier than before. Science and technology were yielding great discoveries during this time, increasing mankind's understanding of his physical world, and new ideas of change and progress were coming into conflict with traditional beliefs and ways of life.



THE FIRST COUNCIL OF QUEEN VICTORIA

During this same time however, some of the difficulties of governing such a large and diverse empire, were becoming apparent on both the domestic and international fronts. Although the decades following the Napoleonic War were relatively peaceful, by mid-century, Britain became involved in a series of wars, in [China](#), [Afghanistan](#), [the Crimea](#), [India](#), [Burmah](#), [Egypt](#), [Soudan](#), [Greece](#), [West Africa](#), [Abyssinia](#), and [South Africa](#), that in many cases were required to maintain Britain's dominion over unruly native populations. These wars were not always popular either

in Britain's colonial regions, or at home, and were the frequent cause of the collapse of whichever British governing party was currently in power.

**Politics and Culture**—In the realm of domestic politics, the commencement of the reign of Victoria coincided very nearly with the beginning of the new reformed parliament, which was at first dominated by Whigs. The reform-minded Whigs made many new laws which restricted the abuse of laborers in the factories, encouraged efforts applied towards public education, revised the poor-laws, and even abolished slavery in all of the colonies of the United Kingdom. Many of these laws, some of which required higher taxes, were contentious, and soon after the accession of [Queen Victoria](#) to the throne, the Tories, led by Prime Minister [Robert Peel](#), were back in power. The Tory (or conservative party) base however, had changed, and was increasingly sympathetic to the concerns of the middle classes, and was also known for lowering import and export duties, to encourage more trade. For most of the Victorian era power alternated between the domestic-reform minded Whigs, whose best known spokesman was [William Gladstone](#), and the imperial-reform minded Tories, whose best known spokesman was [Benjamin Disraeli](#).



CARLYLE AND TENNYSON TALKED AND SMOKED TOGETHER

In the fields of literature, arts, science, and invention, the Victorian age in Britain, was full of astounding genius. [Michael Faraday](#), [Lord Kelvin](#) and [James Clerk Maxwell](#), were all well known for their inquiries into electricity, magnetism, and thermodynamics, while [Charles Darwin](#) and [Thomas Huxley](#) put forth a theory of evolution that challenged accepted notions of Biblical Creation. Famous Victorian age poets include [Rudyard Kipling](#), Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Oscar Wilde, Robert Lewis Stevenson, and of course, [Alfred Tennyson](#). Victorian age novelists included [Charles Dickens](#), [William Thackeray](#), Jules Verne, and the Bronte sisters.

**Commerce, Free Trade and Colonial problems**—The ideas of [Adam Smith](#) had taken great hold of the commerce-minded middle class of Britain so free-market ideas which encouraged trade were becoming more prevalent in both parties. The reduction of import duties on manufactured goods, however, was not as controversial as the reduction of tariffs on food-stuffs (known as corn-laws), since the corn-laws protected the incomes on peasant farmers as well as the powerful landed squires. It was not until the crisis of the Irish potato famine in 1846, that the corn-laws, which raised the price of food for everyone, were abolished. This eased the crisis somewhat, but the grievances of the Irish peasants against their British overlords were very great and long-standing. Catholic Ireland had been oppressed by Britain since the time of the reformation, and now that the British middle classes had won some political rights there

was a great movement afoot in Ireland to achieve self-government, that was opposed by those in Britain who feared the radical element. The "Irish Problem", continued to be a controversial political problem in Britain, throughout the reign of Victoria, in spite of the best efforts of some statesmen sympathetic to the Irish, including [Daniel O'Connell](#), [Charles Parnell](#), and [William Gladstone](#).

By the mid-nineteenth century, Britain's international trade was the envy of the world, and it was by far the wealthiest and most powerful nation the world had ever seen. It had established trade, (sometimes forcibly, as in China), with almost every country on the globe and was actively trying to develop its colonies, by building railroads, encouraging commerce, and in some cases, supporting missionary activity. Its prestige however, took several blows, in the mid 1850's first with the [Crimean War](#), when due to commercial concerns; she took the side of the degenerate Ottoman Empire against Russia. Soon after, the [Indian Mutiny](#), a wide-scale rebellion against British authority, broke out and was only put down at great cost after a series of disturbing atrocities. Following shortly afterward were the infamous [Opium Wars](#) with China. While Britain achieved military victories in all these conflicts, the contention and controversies involved planted seeds of anti-imperialism both inside and outside British domains.

**Exploration and Colonization of Africa**—The colonization and exploration of Africa, particularly the regions of South Africa, was accomplished primarily during the Victorian era, much later than that of Asia, and it was desired to avoid some of the missteps that Britain had taken in Asia. Unquestionably, in Africa there was a more conscious effort to deal fairly with the native populations, and utilize missionary activities to help "civilize" the inhabitants. For most of the 19th century, for example, Britain worked actively against the slave trade, and tried to keep peace among warring tribes, when possible. However, there were, as always, great difficulties, and Britain was pulled into wars in South Africa, against both the [Zulus](#) and their enemies, the [Boers](#), who had resisted British rule. Britain was also drawn into conflicts in West Africa, and the Egypt-Sudan region, where native war-lords rose against the Ottoman-Egyptian government, a British ally. The African interior, which was entirely unexplored by white men, was also tackled during this era, most notably by [David Livingstone](#), a Scottish missionary, but other British explorers included [H. M. Stanley](#), [Richard Burton](#), and [John Hanning Speke](#).