

Title—The Imperialism of Free Trade
Journal—The Economic History Review
Authors—Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher
Year—1953

Categories: British Empire, Historiography, Economics, Colonialism/Imperialism

Place: British Empire

Time: 1840-1910

Argument Synopsis:

Robinson and Gallagher's article attempts to provide a new theory regarding British expansion in the nineteenth century. According to them, the conventional wisdom (in 1953) was that the mid-Victorian era (1840-1870s) was characterized as anti-imperialist or an empire of indifference contrasted with the late-Victorian era (1870s-1900) characterized as actively imperialist and expansionist. In particular, they argue that this dominant argument ignores the 'informal empire' of Britain, i.e. places that were not colored red on the colonial map but nonetheless experienced significant British influence. They claim that the issue with this argument is that it leaves out too many of the facts it purports to explain, including that during the so-called anti-imperialist period British control was asserted over almost twenty discrete localities. Robinson and Gallagher note how India's colonial history is filled with both wars and annexations during the so-called period of indifference. This narrative that they are writing again hinges on the understanding the British governments in the free trade era considered empire to be superfluous. They posit that the refusal to annex is not proof of reluctance to control. Instead, Robinson and Gallagher present a hypothesis of a fundamental continuity in British expansion throughout the nineteenth century. This hypothesis includes both formal and informal expansion and allows for continuity of the process. They also argue that imperialism should be viewed as only indirectly connection with economic integration because it sometimes extends beyond areas of economic development. Although imperialism is a function of economic expansion, it is not a necessary function.

Robinson and Gallagher utilize the concept of the totality of British expansion to reinstate the main themes of the history of modern British expansion. The growth of British industry in the nineteenth century made new demands upon British policy necessitating linking undeveloped areas with British foreign trade. Many of these linkages constitute what Robinson and Gallagher deem the informal empire. They utilize examples from the mid-Victorian period to emphasize the inaccuracy of deeming it an era of indifference and that free trade did not dispense with empire as is traditionally argued. They posit that the mid-Victorian era was actually the decisive stage in the history of British expansion overseas, in that the combination of commercial penetration and political influence allowed the British state to command these economies. Robinson and Gallagher argue that British policy, in both the mid- and late-Victorian periods, followed the principle of extending control informally if possible and formally if necessary. Under this hypothesis, the mid-Victorian period appears as an era of large-scale expansion and late-Victorian period does not seem to introduce any significant novelty into that process of expansion.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The process of expansion had reached its most valuable targets long before the exploitation of the peripheral and marginal field of tropical Africa
- Only when and where informal political means failed to provide the framework of security for British enterprise (commercial, philanthropic, or strategic) that the question of establishing formal empire arose
- Conventional theory that free trade could dispense with empire is false, it did not do so