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ROYAL EMPIRE SOCIETY ESSAY COMPETITION.

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CLASS 'A'.

SUBJECT : " 'Empire' or 'Commonwealth' - How have
these two terms come to be applied to the
King's realms; what is their significance
and difference ".

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At the time of Richard II, the term "empire" was first applied officially to the King's realms, which at that time did not extend beyond the British Isles. Now the same term is applied to a vast conglomeration of widely varied lands and races, occupying one fourth of the land surface of the globe and forming the most gigantic fabric of power that has ever existed in history. Obviously, these two empires are not the same, yet how can the same term be applied accurately to both? What is the significance of the more recent term "commonwealth", and how are both terms used in describing the realms of King George VI? To answer these questions is the object of this essay.

Before discussing these questions more fully it is necessary to consider the remarkable circumstances of the growth of the British Empire. On the stage of human history it stands apart, no precedents existing for the guidance of its rulers. With the great empires of the ancient world the British Empire has little in common. "Imperium" signified originally the right possessed by a Roman magistrate to employ force to secure civil obedience, and an empire usually implied centralisation of rule, domination by military force and unity of governmental system. None of these is characteristic of the British Empire.

The present complex and indefinable structure of the Empire can be explained only by its historical growth, the facts of which are also unique and unparalleled. The other empires of history were mainly founded by military conquest, but during the last three centuries, and above all in the period since the American Revolution, the British Empire has been expanded far beyond the limits of the Mother Country, not, as a rule, by conquest, but by wholly peaceful means. The lands composing the Empire have been obtained mainly by settlement of previously unoccupied territories, by treaties and by voluntary cession. Even where colonization was first begun as the result of war, it is almost entirely upon subsequent peaceful growth that the present importance of the territories depends. A notable example of this is the Dominion of Canada which has developed infinitely from the trading settlement at Quebec taken from the French during the Seven Years' War.

The circumstances making possible the stupendous expansion of British rule into many of the previously unoccupied parts of the world have been largely dependant on the fact that Britain is an island power. Ours is the only empire founded by an island people. The fact that we were a sea-girt people compelled us to guard our own integrity with a powerful navy, and once we had secured our own defence against foreign invasion, the ocean lay open to us for the expansion of our people into distant lands. The development which took place as a result of this may be conveniently divided into three stages.

The first stage filled three centuries, from the voyages of Columbus to the American Revolution (1492 - 1782). This was an era of intense international rivalry between most of the European nations, and colonization for the purpose of trade was carried out by Portugal, Spain, Holland and France. England established trading posts in the West Indies, West Africa and India, but the American Colonies, which formed the First British Empire, were all established not by Government action, but by the spontaneous enterprise of groups of free citizens who enjoyed a large measure of self government. Virginia, founded in 1609, was the first of the thirteen colonies, and by the middle of the eighteenth century a fast-increasing and prosperous nation was firmly established. In matters of self-government and religious tolerance the English colonies differed greatly from their rivals. Every colony established by the English was endowed with rights of self government. No colony established by any other people was ever given these rights.

In the eighteenth century Britain and France were the great rivals for overseas supremacy, but by 1763 Britain had won a decisive victory and had got the upper hand in trade everywhere. Then, the immediate threat of France being thus removed, the American states felt less dependant upon Britain and the stubbornness of King George III was all that was necessary to provoke the colonists to revolt. With the assistance of France and Spain they emerged victorious and the First British Empire was shattered.

The Second British Empire, which rose from the ruins of the First and may be said to end in 1880 was not acquired by deliberate design, but almost as the result of a series of accidents. After the American Revolution the European nations abandoned the ambitions of an overseas empire. They had come to the conclusion that colonies were not worth the cost and trouble of founding and developing them.

In Britain the same views were prevalent that colonies were not worth acquiring. The loss of the First Empire had taught British statesmen a bitter lesson, and with a heavily-burdened exchequer, they shrank from assuming new responsibilities, and were eager to be rid of those they already possessed. Jeremy Bentham was one of the apostles of this new imperial policy and in 1793 published his opinions in "Emancipate your Colonies". Determined to avoid the blunders that had cost them the American Colonies, the leaders of the "Manchester School" of politicians, who dominated the nineteenth century policy, resolved to train for complete independance, by successive doses of self-government, the various parts of the Second Empire.

"Benthamism" exercised a great influence on our colonial policy for nearly a century. Besides being responsible for Britain's reluctance in taking over the government of new countries, Bentham's doctrine in a large measure brought about the great Free Trade movement which gained such importance in the nineteenth century. The Manchester School reasoned that Free Trade was not only the most hopeful path to peace but it would also help to get rid of the encumbrance of colonies. Cobden, the successor of Bentham, said, "The colonial system can never be got rid of except by the indirect

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process of Free Trade, which will gradually and imperceptibly loose the bonds which unite our colonies to us".

Yet, despite this widespread reluctance and lack of enthusiasm for dependant communities, Britain acquired during the nineteenth century, a vast new empire of continents and sub-continents - India, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, linked together by large numbers of islands and calling stations. There are several reasons for this unwilling expansion.

During this century Britain was the unchallenged mistress of the seas and without a rival in the colonial sphere, due to Europe's preoccupation in a long series of revolutions and nationalistic wars which lasted up till 1880. The great religious and humanitarian movement which swept England, resulting in much missionary activity and the prohibition of slavery, brought about a transformation in the British attitude towards the lower races, which had a profound effect upon the development of the Empire.

Another factor was the growth of the Industrial Revolution, which caused British manufactures and shipping to grow by leaps and bounds. Traders wanted civilized government to make their markets secure and urged the expansion of British rule. Also, the rapidly growing population caused emigration on a vast scale to lands in the Antipodes, facilitating greatly the growth of the Empire.

Thus through various causes, Britain was forced to undertake the government of vast areas of new lands. But Bentham's doctrine was still believed in and by 1880 the four main colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Cape Colony all enjoyed responsible government, and were in no way dominated by the mother country. Besides these, there were numerous lesser colonies which were all flourishing and given a large degree of self-government in domestic affairs. This made up the Second British Empire, a marvellous structure of power and influence built up without any fixed ambitions of domination and without the use of violence or aggression.

Before the separatist policy urged by Bentham could achieve a final victory, a new era in history had opened. About 1880 the century of uncontested British expansion came to an end, and a period opened of eager rivalry for world power among the European states. The progress of industrialisation, the increase in population, new scientific inventions and peace in Europe caused an international scramble for tropical territory. By far the richest parts of Africa and most of the Pacific islands were added to the already gigantic British Empire. These additions, all peacefully acquired between 1880 and 1900, may be described as the Third British Empire.

The most important reason for this sudden expansion was the change of public opinion in England. In the period of uncontested expansion the public had taken little interest in colonial development. But when other nations displayed their envy of Britain a new pride in empire grew up and a period of emotional imperialism came into existence and flourished in the 'eighties and 'nineties of last century. It gave birth to Colonial Conferences and the idea of Imperial Federation, and it had great celebrations

at Victoria's Jubilees in 1887 and 1897. Under the influence of this new public feeling and because of the advantage of greater experience and previous commercial penetration, Britain acquired a new empire far greater than that of her rivals. It included large portions of Africa - Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, the Sudan, and Rhodesia, and a great many island groups and archipelagos in the Pacific. The acquisition of these lands, apart from those held in mandate since the war, completed the development of the British Empire to its present position.

This bald outline will help us to understand the development and changing character of the extraordinary political structure we call the British Empire. For at least three hundred years this term has been a misnomer and, as General Smuts once said, the man who found an appropriate name for it would be doing a real service to the Empire. As mentioned before, the British Empire is a unique phenomenon in politics, incapable of exact description by the usual terms of political science. The only time when there was an Empire in the proper sense of the word was when it was first employed by Richard II to demonstrate England's independence from and equal status with the Holy Roman Empire. An empire in its true sense is an autocratic regime ruled by military force. Thus the term could not be properly applied to Britain after the time of Cromwell's brief regime, but we have not yet found another to replace it.

When England became a colonizing nation, the term was extended to include her overseas possessions. Until today all the widely diverse lands spread over the world which acknowledge George VI as ultimate sovereign are collectively called the "British Empire". The use and significance of this term as applied to overseas possessions have changed greatly throughout the last three and a half centuries. In the period of the First British Empire the "empire" was the American colonies and the West Indies, as other possessions were only trading posts operated and governed by powerful companies. In one way this was a true empire, for it was disciplined, or an attempt was made to do so, by military force; but apart from this the First Empire possessed a very large measure of self-government.

After the American Revolution the King's dominions resembled less and less the great empires of ancient days. There was no unity of governmental system or military domination, and very few Englishmen took any interest in the Second Empire at all. The creed of "Little Englandism" was generally believed in until the 'eighties and its leaders, Cornwall Lewis and Goldwin Smith, repeatedly urged that the colonial system should be cast off altogether. The general public looked forward quite complacently to the day when Canada, Australia and New Zealand would bear the same relation to Britain as the United States. The term "empire" was regarded almost contemptuously and colonies were thought of as ~~as~~ extravagant self-seeking communities who would retain their allegiance to Britain no longer than suited their immediate requirements.

About 1870 the tide began to turn and gradually public sentiment was won over to the new "Imperialism". It was Disraeli, the leader of the

new Conservative Party, who was the apostle of this revival and encouraged it with fiery speeches in Parliament. He gradually persuaded the people that the unity and co-operation of the Empire were necessary if Britain was to maintain her position of a great Power. The ultimate victory of Imperialism was achieved in the 'nineties, and it became one of the most potent forces in moulding British thought. People began to realize for the first time that Britain's work of colonization was an achievement worthy of pride, and that the building of the overseas empire was one of the greatest feats of modern history.

This movement was given great impetus at the time of the South African war, when all the colonies voluntarily sent assistance for Britain in the shape of men and materials, and this new spirit of co-operation and mutual help was shown to a remarkable extent in the Great War, when all parts of the Empire suffered heavy losses in the defence of the Motherland. It would be difficult to over-estimate the assistance rendered by the Dominions, who were independantly represented on the British War Cabinet and played an important part in the drawing up of the Peace Settlement. The Empire became a symbol of courage and devotion, and every Englishman was proud of the wonderful brotherhood his country had built up.

The name "Commonwealth" has gained popularity during the last half-century. General Smuts was responsible for the title "British Commonwealth of Nations". It is not a substitute for the term "empire", but is a name for the important part of it made up by Great Britain and the four self-governing Dominions - Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The term "Commonwealth" implies the possession of internal liberty, and the history of the relations between Great Britain and the Dominions is as unique and unprecedented as the development of the Empire itself.

All the dominions originated as "Colonies of settlement", settled and developed by virile, enterprising immigrants without any assistance from the British government. In the era of Benthamism and Little Englandism they were rapidly granted a large amount of self-government, and by the period of the Third Empire they were all virtually independant in all domestic matters. Then, when the international scramble for territory took place, the colonies, particularly in the Pacific, became alarmed at the foreign intrusion and protested against the apathy of the Foreign Office in protecting their interests.

This, together with such literature as Seeley's "Expansion of Britain" and Froude's histories, and the rising tide of Imperialism generally, brought about a realisation of the need for greater co-operation. In 1884 the Imperial Federation League came into being under very influential leaders and drew public attention towards the colonial question. One offspring of the League, which was dissolved in 1893, was the first Colonial Conference, a meeting of Colonial Prime Ministers under the presidency of Lord Salisbury, held in London on the occasion of the Jubilee in 1887. At this conference an important grievance was first brought to light by an Australian delegate who alleged that despite the concession of "Responsible Government" to the colonies, they had no hand in shaping the foreign policy of the Empire, but no definite decisions were made.

Another conference took place in 1897 with Joseph Chamberlain presiding. This great colonial minister did more than any other man to strengthen the bonds of Empire, and fervently supported the causes of Imperial Federation and Imperial Preference. In his opening speech at the ¹⁸⁹⁷ Conference he suggested the formation of an Empire Council or Parliament, but no definite steps were taken. With only New Zealand dissenting a resolution was adopted that the present political relations between Great Britain and the colonies were satisfactory.

In subsequent conferences, held in 1902, 1907 and 1911, greater participation in Imperial policy was urged by the colonies, and Britain was forced to realize that they could not be put off by vague promises. The idea of an Imperial Parliament, urged by New Zealand in particular, was rejected owing to the fear that such a body could not fail to infringe the autonomy of the colonies. At the same time it was realized that the responsibility in foreign affairs, treaties, war and peace could not remain solely Britain's, whatever the legal position. Canada proved this by negotiating trade treaties with Germany and the United States entirely on her own initiative.

Another important factor of the 1911 conference was the holding of a secret session when Sir Edward Grey gave a confidential account of the darkening international situation. After his revelations it was resolved that thenceforward envoys negotiating any treaties affecting the Dominions must act on instructions drawn up by the Foreign Office in consultation with all the governments concerned. It was plain that the Dominions were no longer dependants, but partners with Britain.

This new relationship still held when the Great War broke out. Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa all declared war separately, the Union having a parliamentary debate before making its decision. In 1917, after the British Cabinet reshuffle, the Prime Ministers of the Dominions were summoned to London to sit as full members of the War Cabinet and share its responsibilities. At the Peace Conference the Dominions demanded to be separately represented and Britain at once conceded. When the time came for the signing of the Treaties of Peace the nationhood of all the Dominions was formally recognised, as each Dominion signed separately. All nations at last recognized the unique character of the British Commonwealth as a group of free nations under a single sovereign, but each capable of making an independent decision.

In post-war affairs, such as the Turkish crisis of 1920, and the Canadian-United States Halibut Treaty, the Dominions made full use of their new status and were impatient to have it properly confirmed. This was done at the Imperial Conference of 1926 where it was declared that the United Kingdom and the Dominions "are autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status and in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs though united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated members of the British Commonwealth of Nations". This definition was ratified by the British Parliament in the Statute of Westminster 1931.

K.C. Wheare -
"Domn. Status
& Statute of
Westminster"
- page 28.

Edmd. Burke -
 Marriot -
 "Evoln. of Bt.
 Empire". p.176

Today, the growth of the self-governing communities within the Empire has reached its culmination, and together they form a real Commonwealth, the greatest the world has seen. Although they are each a free and separate nation, they stand united in the face of all dangers to the Homeland or the Empire, united by "ties which though light as air, are strong as links of iron".

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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"A Hundred Years of the British Empire" - A. P. Newton.

"The British Empire - How it Grew and How it is Governed" -

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