

British Colonial Stirrings

This lecture is an attempt to cover the beginnings of British colonialism at the end of the sixteenth century. Remember, John and Sebastian Cabot had explored the eastern coast of North America for the English in 1497. They did not establish colonies though. That attempt was not made until the end of the sixteenth century.

I. Shifts in English Orientation that provided backdrop for Colonialism

- A. In the early 1550s we see the beginnings of British colonization thought.
- B. There was no sudden eruption of interest in overseas settlement as such and there was no sudden determination on the part of England to assert its claim to America.
- C. Instead there were two basic shifts in orientation, both of which would eventually involve colonization but neither of which was originally directed to that goal. The first shift was in England's economy, the second in its international relations.

1. Economy (collapse of the Antwerp wool market and the need for new markets)

- a. England's prosperity in the early sixteenth century was based on the expanding European market for its raw wool and woolen cloth.
- b. The main sources of capital in England and the most skilled entrepreneurs had been involved in this well-established trade; the whole of the economy, as a result, had been locked into the Antwerp market, in what is now Belgium, through which England's woolen products had flowed to their eventual European consumers.
- c. Through the reign of Henry VIII more and more capital and labor had been involved in this dominant commercial enterprise, more and more arable land had been turned to pasturage, and England's financial stability had become increasingly dependent on Antwerp.
- d. In the late 1540s the financial and commercial structure began to weaken. By 1550 the Antwerp market was saturated; and in 1551 it collapsed
- e. Cloth exports fell off 35 percent within a year and the money market was thrown into turmoil.
- f. The merchants were forced to reconsider the whole of their activities. The old patterns of trade were no longer reliable. New markets would have to be found, new routes of trade devised, and capital risked in ways that a previous generation would have thought wildly speculative.

2. International Relations

- a. Early 16th century
 - 1. Antagonism toward France had dominated England's policies through the reign of Henry VIII, and in this rivalry Spain had been England's ally.
 - 2. As a result England had been willing to respect Spain's claim to the whole of the Western Hemisphere [Treaty of Tordesillas (1494)]

3. The tie between Spain and England was confirmed by the marriage of Queen Mary (1553-58) to Philip II of Spain.

b. Change with Elizabeth

1. The accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1558 began a reversal in international relations as England's Protestantism began to dominate its foreign policy.

2. By the 1560s it was clear that Spain threatened England's independence as a Protestant nation and that England's long-range interests in Europe lay in the support of the rebellious Protestants in France and of the Netherlands struggling to free themselves from Spanish rule.

3. England became Spain's enemy, and although they did not challenge Spain until the 1580s, Englishmen harassed and plundered Spanish territories and ships.

II. Factors Driving English Colonization Efforts

A. Rise of Semi-piratical raiding under Elizabeth

1. Semi-piratical raids on Spanish commerce and Spanish shipping began in 1562 when **John Hawkins** broke the Spanish trade monopoly in the West Indies and the Spanish Main with the first of a series of quasi-legal and highly lucrative peddling voyages

2. **Francis Drake** took up the challenge at that point and began twenty years of raids on Spanish colonial properties, the culmination of which was his famous circumnavigation of the globe in 1577-80, a joint-stock enterprise which yielded 4600 percent profit to the shareholders.

B. Rise of Joint Stock Companies that sought new markets overseas

C. Search for Northwest Passage to the East

1. In 1565, **Sir Humphrey Gilbert** debated before the Privy Council the likelihood of finding a northwestern passage through the Western Hemisphere into the Far East

2. Then in 1576-78, **Martin Frobisher**, financed by a London group, led three expeditions to what would become known as Hudson Bay

3. Although these men did not find a northwest passage, their efforts led to a reasonably clear picture of Canadian North America.

Within all of these overseas enterprises—the semipiratical raids on Spanish territory, the launching of new joint-stock companies the probing of new routes to the northwest—the idea of colonization slowly developed.

III. Putting Colonial Thought into Action: Sir Humphrey Gilbert and the Colonial Idea

A. In 1578, Sir Humphrey Gilbert received a crown patent for establishing a colony in New England or Nova Scotia.

B. Gilbert's attempt failed, and he died in 1584 on a return voyage from Newfoundland.

D. Gilbert had however, engaged the enthusiasm of his half-brother **Sir Walter Raleigh**, and the **two Richard Hakluyts**, experts on overseas geography, who became important propagandists of colonization.

E. The younger Richard Hakluyt's *Discourse of Western Planting* (1584) shows the mingling motives of Englishmen for planting colonies:

1. It was England's duty to Christianize the American pagans
2. An American colony would provide a base for attacks on Spanish lands and Spanish treasure ships
3. The American colonies could supply England with exotic goods otherwise brought from Spain and also create new markets for English consumer goods
4. American colonies could draw off England's unemployed workers, turning them into productive citizens

F. The "Lost Colony of Roanoke"

1. When Gilbert died in 1584, Queen Elizabeth transferred his patent to **Walter Raleigh**, but her government did nothing to help launch or sustain his efforts.

2. Raleigh established Roanoke, Virginia in 1585. This colony also failed, and has become known as the "lost colony." Three groups of settlers had died or were missing by 1587. The second set of settlers were most likely killed by Amerindians. The disappearance of the third has never been accounted for.

IV. Ideology of colonization: Ireland and America

A. As Gilbert, Raleigh, and other early English colonizers failed in North America, others succeeded in Ireland.

B. Later English colonizers therefore looked to the Irish example for their ideology of colonization.

C. Seventeenth century English colonizers brought with them what might be called an ideology of colonization—a framework of attitudes and ideas concerning permanent overseas colonies, the character of colonists, and the relations of colonies to the surrounding environment.

D. In 1566, the English entered Ireland in a surge of military conquest. Only by force of arms, it was felt, could England dominate Ireland, which it was feared would be a natural stepping stone for any invasion of England.

E. For the English, the native Irish were a strange and dangerous race. Primitive brutes, as the Elizabethans saw them, manifestly pagan, living by codes and in tribal arrangements the English could not understand.

F. The Irish could not be dealt with as the Spanish had dealt with the sophisticated Moslems or the Aztecs or the Incas.

G. The Irish could not be pacified and absorbed into a new frontier or colonial culture. Conquest must mean destruction—the devastation of native communities; and control must mean the repopulation of the land by the English themselves.

H. So was born the concept of the "**plantation.**" A "plantation" meant a transplantation, a replantation of complete units of English society—the wholesale removal of English men and women to foreign lands. There, they would reproduce their original communities and their original way of life as closely as possible, and subjugate and rule the natives.

I. For the natives to enter into the new English society they must give up their original identities, adopt English law, English religion, and the ordinary ways of English life, and merge into the dominant culture.

J. So, we see that the English ideology of colonization was strikingly different from the ideas and attitudes the Spanish had brought with them and which they had put into practice in Central and South America.

IV. Methods of Establishing Colonies

The English government authorized the use of two agencies to promote the establishment of settlements overseas: the chartered trading company and the proprietorship. Both were well known to the merchants and landholders of England and proved to be well adapted to the purposes of colonization.

A. The Chartered Trading Company

1. After the collapse of the Antwerp market, merchants looked for new markets.
2. As merchants looked overseas and set up new overseas trading posts, their costs and risks climbed. To tie up a ship and crew and cargo for a voyage that might take two to four years involved an outlay of cash few men could spare.
3. Therefore, the new business, like the Guinea Company (1555), the Muscovy Company (1555), the Eastland Company (1579), the Levant Company (1581), and the East India Company (1600), were joint-stock chartered trading companies.
4. The members of the commercial joint-stock companies, operating under royal charters were called of "adventurers" (stockholders)
 - a. they pooled their resources in a common fund.

- b. they shared pro rata the profits and losses of the colonial venture.
5. By powers granted in the royal charter of the joint-stock companies, the members were:
 - a. enabled to set up trading monopolies with overseas areas
 - b. empowered to assemble and make laws for their government overseas
 - c. eased by the idea of perpetual succession, or perpetuity (company did not die with the death of one of the members)
6. In practice, political control of the colony was at first vested in the directors of the company, who were usually more interested in profits than in the settlers.
7. Most charters provided that colonists should have all the rights and privileges of Englishmen and their governing bodies should pass no law contrary to the laws of England.
8. However, there was no limited liability
The pressure on the settlers was intensified by the fact that the legal liability of stockholders was unlimited. The backers of the settlements were personally liable, without limit, for any debts the settlement companies might incur, and they were therefore extremely sensitive to the possibility of failure.
9. The settlers, many of whom were in effect employees of these companies for a stated term of years, were consequently placed under great pressure to produce an immediate profit for the company. If they failed to ship back tangible proof of the financial value of the settlement, they would be cut off to fend for themselves as best they could. As a consequence, instead of searching carefully into the strange American environment, they spent time scrabbling for evidence of gold, searching for routes to the Pacific Ocean, and for great cities or for vast sources of furs or precious metals.
10. Two of the colonies were established by English chartered trading companies: the settlement at Jamestown Virginia, by the London Company (1607), soon known as the Virginia Company; and the Puritan colony of the Massachusetts Bay Company (1630).
11. Two of the original thirteen colonies were established by non-English trading companies: New Netherland, later New York, by the Dutch West India Company in 1623; and Delaware by a Swedish company in 1638. New York was captured by the English in 1664 and became a royal province with its proprietor, James, duke of York, became king in 1685. Delaware fell under the proprietary control of the duke, who then sold it to William Penn, the proprietor of Pennsylvania.
12. The chief characteristic that distinguished the corporate colony from the others in English America was the large measure of self-government which it enjoyed. The stockholders of the Massachusetts Bay Company migrated to America with their charter, thus making the colony corporate or self-governing. The qualified voters in the colony chose the governor, the governor's council, and the legislative

assembly. Massachusetts was a corporate colony until it lost its charter in 1684, when it became a royal colony. At the same time Connecticut and Rhode Island, originally settled by dissident groups from Massachusetts, gained royal charters that conferred upon the colonists control of their own governments.

B. Proprietary Grants

1. Of the thirteen English colonies, seven were founded as proprietorships
 - a. Maryland by Lord Baltimore (1632)
 - b. New Hampshire by John Mason (1635)
 - c. New Jersey by Sir William Berkeley and Sir George Carteret (1663)
 - d. The Carolinas by friends of Charles I (1663)
 - e. Pennsylvania by William Penn (1682)
 - f. Georgia by James Oglethorpe and a board of trustees (1732)
2. All but Pennsylvania and Maryland had become royal provinces by the outbreak of the Revolution.
3. The proprietary charters normally granted huge tracts of land to an individual or group of persons on terms reminiscent of feudal tenure.
4. In the proprietorships, political control was put in the hands of those who received the royal grant, but in most cases it was delegated in part to representatives chosen by the colonists.
5. The owners usually invested their personal fortunes in developing their lands and thus were placed in the position of having to attract new settlers to purchase or rent small holdings from them in order to reap profits.