

History Insights
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*The British Empire:
Pomp, Power and
Postcolonialism*

Robert Johnson

*'...the nexus
of Mars and
Mammon...'*

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A Note on the Author

Rob Johnson is a History Lecturer at Warwick University, England. He is the author of a number of publications including *British Imperialism: Histories and Controversies* (Palgrave, 2002); and his most recent books are *Spying for Empire: The Great Game in Central and South Asia, 1757–1947* (Greenhill 2006), and *A Region in Turmoil: South Asian Conflicts, 1947–2001* (Reaktion, 2005). He regularly gives radio and television broadcasts. He gained his PhD, on British Intelligence in the Great Game, with the University of Exeter in 1999. Prior to his academic career, Rob was a Captain in the British Army. In his spare time he leads adventurous expeditions to remote parts of the world and he is currently writing a new history of conflict in Central Asia.

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I: A Journey over Palm and Pine: An Overview of Histories, Peoples and Developments

1. Early Colonialism: Exploration, Exploitation and Chartered Companies

It was the fact that Britain was an island with particular resources and civil organisation that gave it an impetus to acquire an empire. Britain had to import and export its goods and resources which compelled its people to develop the skills of trade; it enjoyed the natural protection of the seas for much of its history which allowed its wealth to accumulate, and its relative isolation encouraged the development of a separate identity. The temperate climate, warmed by the waters of the Gulf Stream, provided good fish stocks and produce on the land sufficient, if not always in abundance, for its population's needs. Its island position compelled the British to master seamanship, and catalysed the search for new resources overseas.

In the course of searching for new fishing grounds, John Cabot reached the 'newe founde landes' in 1497. However, the novelty of the people and animals there had begun to wane as early as 1504. The first attempt to find a way through these northern lands to East Asia, the real prize for British merchants eager to sell their cloth, took place in 1527, but, as with the trade to Russia and the Baltic in the 1550s, it was the environment, namely ice, which hindered further progress. Initially, Elizabeth I forbade any notion of trading or colonising in the southern hemisphere for fear of her Spanish and Portuguese rivals, but in 1577, with conflict looming, Francis Drake was commissioned to reconnoitre unoccupied lands, establish a 'colony' (in effect, a base for naval operations), and pillage as the opportunity presented itself. Drake managed a circumnavigation of the globe, and his raiding exploits led to a wave of attacks on Iberian vessels in the years that followed.¹ However, it was not until 1585 that a landing was made at Roanoke Island on the coast of North America as the first experiment with a permanent colony.

The Roanoke colony was little more than a trial.² The colonists were to survey the land, assess the natural resources (and look especially for gold), evaluate potential relations with the Indians, look for a suitable harbour, and carry out exploratory work

1 Harry Kelsey, *Sir Francis Drake: The Queen's Pirate* (Yale, 2000).

2 Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony* (New York, 1984).