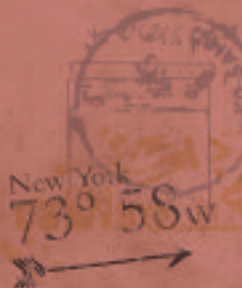


# THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND THE SHRINKING OF THE GLOBE

In his journey Phileas Fogg passes through areas of the British Empire where the detective Fix hopes to serve his arrest warrant. Convinced of his guilt, Fix is surprised Fogg would take such a risk instead of heading for the Dutch or French colonies in Asia. The empire had spread across the world in the wake of trading activity, with raw materials such as cotton, tea and rubber being imported into Britain and manufactured goods exported out. Competition for trading markets, particularly with the French and Germans, led to intensified efforts to establish British influence abroad. In the latter half of the nineteenth century there was the 'scramble for Africa' and the consolidation of British rule in India. By 1901, the year of her death, Queen Victoria ruled nearly one-quarter of the world's population.



Painting of Queen Victoria dated 1837, the year in which she took the throne ([www.imagesofempire.com](http://www.imagesofempire.com)).



Writer Peter Costello says of Verne that his 'anti-imperial attitudes were of a selective kind'. In *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Verne seems to prefer British imperialist efficiency and enterprise to that of the French but dislikes the ugliness of industrialisation brought to the natural beauty of India and the homogeneity of the colonial towns. As narrator, Verne describes the scenes along the Ganges Valley wondering:

*... what must Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu have thought of this India, now 'Britannicized', when some steamboat passed on the Ganges: neighing, churning up the sacred waters, and frightening the seagulls skimming over the surface, the tortoises swarming over its banks, and the devout stretched out along its shores... [The travellers] could hardly glimpse Monghyr, a town which is more than European, being as British as Manchester or Birmingham, renowned for its iron foundries and its factories for edge tools and knives, and whose tall chimneys choked the sky of Brahma with the black smoke – a veritable punch delivered to the land of dreams!*

Such a description suggests a degree of ambivalence with regard to the benefits of industrial progress that lies behind Verne's generally optimistic outlook, a foretaste of the disillusionment that was to come in later years. Coming to Hong Kong, Verne writes:

*Docks, hospitals, wharves, godowns, a Gothic cathedral, a Government House, and surfaced roads – everything made you think that one of the many market towns in Kent or Surrey had passed right through the terrestrial sphere and popped out at this point in China, almost at the antipodes.*

State entry procession at the 1903 Delhi Durbar, by Roderick MacKenzie, 1907 ([www.imagesofempire.com](http://www.imagesofempire.com)).



*Passepartout, hands in pockets, headed for Victoria Harbour, examining the palanquins, the wind-driven wheelbarrows still in use in the Celestial Empire, and the large crowds of Chinese, Japanese, and Europeans filling the streets. With a few exceptions, it was Bombay, Calcutta, or Singapore all over again, that the worthy fellow was finding on his route. There is a trail of British towns right round the world.*

Having mixed with civil servants, army officers and speculators bound for India on the *Mongolia*, Fogg and Passepartout cross the subcontinent from Bombay (now Mumbai) to Calcutta, accompanied on their journey by Sir Francis Cromarty, a brigadier-general who had lived most of his life in the country. Wherever possible the British ruled through persuasion – friendly or otherwise – and local collaboration rather than outright occupation, as this was cheaper than sending out thousands of troops and administrators. From the late eighteenth century, it was the East India Company, a body granted a monopoly of trade in the region by Royal Charter, which managed the civil and military affairs of much of the country rather than the British government. In addition to its trading powers, the company had secured sovereign rights from Indian princes through force and subterfuge. The Crown did not exert full colonial authority until the Indian Mutiny of 1857 though it was directly involved in some legislative issues before then including the outlawing of the practice of suttee in 1829. Victoria was declared Empress of India and its ultimate ruler in 1877, five years after the events in the novel took place. Verne remarks:

*... the general appearance, the customs, and the linguistic and cultural patterns of the Subcontinent are changing very quickly. Formerly every traditional means of transport was used: foot, horse, cart, wheelbarrow, palanquin, men's backs, coach, etc. But now steamboats navigate on the Indus and the Ganges at a rate of knots, and a railway crosses the whole width of India, with branch lines all along its route, meaning that Bombay is only three days from Calcutta.*

Work had begun on the Great Indian Peninsular Railway in 1852, supervised by Brunel's close friend the engineer Robert Stephenson, with the first passenger service from Bombay to Thana starting in April 1853. The track later extended across two routes: one to Nagpur and Calcutta, the other to Bangalore and Madras. The Indian railway network provided the links between major ports, industrial centres and agricultural regions essential for effective trade as well as connections to politically strategic sites. By the 1860s, India had 2,500 miles of railway track, much of it laid by British navvies and overseen by British engineers, and by the end of the century this had increased ten-fold. Verne describes how the locomotive 'with a British engine-driver and burning British coal, threw its smoke out over the plantations of red pepper, cotton, coffee, nutmeg, and cloves'.



A Chinese opium-smoking den, one of a series drawn by Thomas Allom in 1843 (www.imagesofempire.com).



Brass opium pipes, China, nineteenth century (www.imagesofempire.com).

From Calcutta, the travellers head for the busy port of Hong Kong where Passepartout succumbs to the narcotic effects of opium. Opium was originally imported to China by the East India Company, the only product they could think of that the Chinese would buy in return for selling their tea, silk and spices. The Chinese government had tried to ban opium smoking in 1729 because of its devastating effect upon the people's health and the crime and disorder associated with it, but British merchants continued to smuggle in the drug. When Chinese officials destroyed 20,000 chests of British opium at Canton in 1839 in a further attempt to stop

the destructive trade, Britain declared war on the country, protecting its commercial interests. Britain's naval superiority proved decisive and at the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 the Chinese were forced to open five ports to British merchants and to give Hong Kong to the British in perpetuity. This relationship ended in 1997 when Hong Kong was returned to China. Britain again declared war in 1856 at what it saw as continuing Chinese interference in free trade; its victory in 1860 secured legalisation of the opium trade and the admittance of Christian missionaries to China.

By 1900 it is thought that 13 million Chinese had become addicted to the drug. Verne describes the scene in the Hong Kong tavern as follows:

*Fix and Passepartout understood that they were in a den frequented by these wretches: besotted, emaciated, and reduced to idiocy, to whom each year a grasping Britain sells £11,000,000 worth of that lethal drug called opium. These are sad millions, derived from one of the most deadly vices of human nature.*

Such biting social commentary belies the notion that Verne is 'just' a writer of adventures for children.

Time is at the heart of the novel. Across its colonies, Britain introduced standardized time, primarily so trains could run to an agreed timetable and employees could keep regular working hours. Clocks were prominently placed at railway stations, marketplaces and forts. This was of practical benefit in the monitoring of time and also served as a symbol to the local population of Victorian order, discipline and efficiency. Postal services were introduced with the Queen's head appearing on the first postage stamps from 1840. Advances in technology speeded up the service with steamships of the Peninsular & Oriental line bringing post from Britain to the East via the French-built Suez Canal – it is surprising that Verne neglects to describe this engineering feat in detail in the book – and messages able to be transmitted by telegraph to all major colonies by 1875. In 1770 it would take up to seven months for a message to reach Calcutta from Britain using mail coaches, sailing ships and local postmen. By 1840 this had been cut to a month with the use of steam in place of sails and by 1870 a message could be transmitted down the wire in just six hours. By 1902 the entire globe had been circled by submarine telegraph cables so that every major nation in the world could communicate with each other almost instantly. Phileas Fogg's successful endeavour to go round the world in 80 days is partly dependent on this new regularised concept of time and the virtual shrinking of the globe through rapidly improved transport and communications.



Brunel's ss *Great Eastern* during the laying of the transatlantic cable between Ireland and Newfoundland, 1866 (Institution of Civil Engineers).