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## ARTÍCULO VIII

### *The British Footprint in Nineteenth Century Colombia: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Cultural Transformations*

Robert Ojeda Pérez<sup>1</sup>  
Maria Fernanda Cristancho Cucunuba<sup>2</sup>

#### Abstract

This article examines British presence in nineteenth-century Colombia as an integral phenomenon that combined economic, diplomatic, and cultural dimensions. Through a historical-interpretative and documentary approach, the study analyses the ways in which the United Kingdom contributed to Colombia's economic modernization while simultaneously consolidating a structural model of dependency.

The research is grounded in primary and secondary historical sources, including diplomatic correspondence, financial records of loans contracted in London, British and Colombian press of the period, as well as scholarly contributions by authors such as Anthony McFarlane, Miguel Urrutia, Salomón Kalmanovitz, and Martha Lucía Barriga Monroy.

The analysis is developed across three interrelated levels: the economic dimension, focused on the circulation of British capital and external indebtedness; the diplomatic dimension, centred on the actions of agents such as Luis López Méndez and the power networks linking London and Bogotá; and the cultural dimension, which addresses the appropriation of urban, architectural, and sociability models inspired by England.

These dimensions respond to the following research question: How did international relations between Colombia and England influence the transformation of customs, urban practices, and ways of life among Bogotá's elite during the nineteenth century?

The article concludes that this bilateral relationship promoted a form of dependent modernization, framed within the concept of informal empire, which profoundly transformed the nation's economy, diplomacy, and cultural identity.

#### Keywords

Great Britain; nineteenth century; diplomacy; trade; modernization; urban culture

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## Resumen

Este artículo examina la presencia británica en la Colombia del siglo XIX como un fenómeno integral que combinó dimensiones económicas, diplomáticas y culturales. A través de un enfoque histórico-interpretativo y documental, el estudio analiza las formas en que el Reino Unido contribuyó a la modernización económica de Colombia, al tiempo que consolidó un modelo estructural de dependencia.

La investigación se fundamenta en fuentes históricas primarias y secundarias, entre ellas correspondencia diplomática, registros financieros de los préstamos contraídos en Londres, prensa británica y colombiana de la época, así como aportes académicos de autores como Anthony McFarlane, Miguel Urrutia, Salomón Kalmanovitz y Martha Lucía Barriga Monroy.

El análisis se desarrolla en tres niveles interrelacionados: la dimensión económica, centrada en la circulación de capital británico y el endeudamiento externo; la dimensión diplomática, enfocada en las acciones de agentes como Luis López Méndez y las redes de poder que vinculaban Londres y Bogotá; y la dimensión cultural, que aborda la apropiación de modelos urbanos, arquitectónicos y de sociabilidad inspirados en Inglaterra.

Estas dimensiones responden a la siguiente pregunta de investigación: ¿Cómo influyeron las relaciones internacionales entre Colombia e Inglaterra en la transformación de las costumbres, las prácticas urbanas y los modos de vida de la élite bogotana durante el siglo XIX?

El artículo concluye que esta relación bilateral promovió una forma de modernización dependiente, enmarcada en el concepto de imperio informal, que transformó profundamente la economía, la diplomacia y la identidad cultural de la nación.

## Palabras clave:

Gran Bretaña; siglo XIX; diplomacia; comercio; modernización; cultura urbana.

## Introduction

During the nineteenth century, the newly independent Republic of Colombia faced the challenge of building a modern state and defining its position within the international system. The dissolution of the Spanish colonial order gave way to a period of profound uncertainty, but also to new economic and diplomatic opportunities. Within this context, Great Britain emerged as the most influential foreign power, driven by its interest in consolidating commercial and financial dominance in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars and the loss of its North American colonies.

As Anthony McFarlane (1992) explains, British hegemony over Latin America was neither military nor territorial; rather, it was economic and moral, founded upon trade, credit, and diplomacy.

The American independence processes coincided with Britain's rise as the financial centre of industrial capitalism, which led London to expand its investment networks toward the newly formed Latin American republics. According to Avella (2007), the export of British capital shaped an international financial system that conditioned Latin American economies from the 1820s onward. This dynamic explains why Colombia, shortly after its political consolidation, became one of the first countries in the region to contract foreign debt with British firms such as Herring, Graham & Powles, marking the beginning of a relationship of structural dependency.

This process was widely documented in the British press of the period. Newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Morning Chronicle* reported, as early as 1818, the growing commercial interest of the United Kingdom in the region. An editorial published by *The Times* on 21 June 1819 stated that “the northern provinces of South America represent for Great Britain the promise



of new markets that, if stable, may replace those lost in North America.” Similarly, in Colombia, publications such as *La Gaceta de Colombia* (1821–1826) recorded the presence of British agents and legislative debates concerning foreign trade and economic openness.

Nevertheless, the British footprint in Colombia was not limited to the economic sphere. The circulation of ideas, customs, and cultural values was equally decisive. McFarlane (1997) observes that Creole elites, influenced by British Enlightenment thought, embraced liberalism as a synonym for civilisation and social order, a process that became evident in the adoption of urban, architectural, and educational models inspired by England.

Thus, the relationship between Colombia and Great Britain can be understood as a dynamic marked by both cooperation and dependency. London acted simultaneously as creditor, commercial partner, and cultural reference. Kalmanovitz (1985) argues that British capital was channelled through railways, banks, and urban service companies, modernising the economy without strengthening its autonomy, thereby reinforcing a pattern of dependent development.

Taken together, these processes structured four key areas that are examined in this article: the expansion of entrepreneurial activity promoted by British merchants and financial houses; the growth of imports and exports that integrated Colombia into the Atlantic market; the creation of railways, mining enterprises, and navigation companies financed by British capital; and, finally, the transformation of urban development in Bogotá, where architecture, planning, and social practices adopted British models that reshaped elite life. These dimensions demonstrate how British presence permeated the economy, diplomacy, and culture, shaping both the productive structure of the country and the everyday practices of Bogotá’s elite.

In light of these considerations, the purpose of this article is to analyse how British presence influenced Colombia across three interrelated dimensions

(economic, diplomatic, and cultural) in order to demonstrate that Colombian modernization was largely the result of a process of structural dependency embedded within what McFarlane defined as the British informal empire.

### **Theoretical Framework and Historical Background**

The analysis of British influence in nineteenth-century Colombia is grounded in a theoretical framework that combines the concepts of informal empire, dependent modernization, and cultural transfer. These approaches make it possible to understand international relations not merely as interactions between sovereign states, but as asymmetrical processes in which economic power, diplomacy, and cultural influence intersect.

The concept of informal empire, developed by historians such as John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson and later applied to Latin America by Anthony McFarlane, refers to a form of imperial domination exercised without direct territorial control. In this model, influence is exerted through trade, investment, diplomacy, and ideological persuasion rather than through military occupation. Britain’s relationship with Latin America during the nineteenth century constitutes a paradigmatic case of this type of imperial strategy, as it allowed the expansion of British interests while preserving the political sovereignty of newly independent states.

In the Colombian case, the informal empire operated primarily through financial mechanisms and commercial agreements. Following independence, the country lacked both domestic capital and a consolidated financial system, which made foreign credit indispensable. As Urrutia (2002) and Kalmanovitz (1985) point out, British loans became a structural component of state finances, conditioning fiscal policy and limiting economic autonomy. While these loans facilitated short-term state consolidation, they also embedded Colombia within a system of long-term dependency on external capital.

This dynamic is closely related to the notion of dependent modernization. Unlike classical modernization theories, which assume linear development driven by internal industrialisation, dependent modernization emphasises the



uneven integration of peripheral economies into the global capitalist system. In this framework, modernization occurs, but under conditions that favour the interests of external powers. British investment in railways, mining, banking, and navigation modernised key sectors of the Colombian economy without generating an autonomous industrial base, reinforcing structural inequalities.

Beyond economic structures, British influence extended to the cultural sphere through processes of cultural transfer. This concept refers to the circulation and adaptation of ideas, practices, and symbolic forms across national contexts. During the nineteenth century, Colombian elites perceived Britain as a model of progress, order, and civilisation, an image reinforced by diplomatic contacts, educational exchanges, and the presence of British engineers, merchants, and entrepreneurs.

Urban space became one of the most visible arenas of this cultural transfer. As Barriga Monroy (2013) argues, the transformation of Bogotá's urban landscape reflected the adoption of European (particularly British) architectural styles and planning principles. Public buildings, clubs, and residential areas incorporated aesthetic and functional elements inspired by English models, signalling not only economic change but also a reconfiguration of elite identities and social practices.

This theoretical framework allows for an integrated reading of the British footprint in Colombia. Rather than treating economic, diplomatic, and cultural processes as separate phenomena, the article understands them as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a broader system of informal domination. Diplomacy facilitated access to markets and credit; economic penetration sustained political influence; and cultural transfer legitimised British presence by presenting it as synonymous with modernity.

In historical terms, this framework situates Colombia within the wider Atlantic world of the nineteenth century, where power relations were structured by global trade networks, financial centres such as London, and the ideological appeal of liberalism. The British informal empire thus

functioned as a flexible and adaptive system, capable of shaping local trajectories of development while avoiding the costs of formal colonial rule.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology based on documentary analysis and interpretative approaches commonly used in historical research and international relations. The objective is not to measure causal effects in quantitative terms, but to reconstruct and interpret the mechanisms through which British influence operated in Colombia during the nineteenth century, particularly in the economic, diplomatic, and cultural spheres.

The research relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include diplomatic correspondence between Colombian and British authorities, financial records related to external loans contracted in London, and contemporary press publications from both countries. British newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Morning Chronicle*, alongside Colombian publications including *La Gaceta de Colombia*, were analysed to identify dominant narratives regarding trade, foreign investment, and diplomatic relations. These sources provide insight into how British presence was perceived, justified, and debated during the period.

Secondary sources consist of scholarly works by historians and economists who have examined British–Latin American relations and Colombia's nineteenth-century development. Authors such as McFarlane, Kalmanovitz, Urrutia, Avella, and Barriga Monroy were selected due to their methodological rigour and their relevance to the theoretical framework adopted in this article. Rather than using these works descriptively, they are engaged analytically to contextualise the empirical evidence and to support the interpretative dimension of the study.

The analysis was conducted through thematic coding of the sources, organised around three analytical dimensions: economic influence, diplomatic networks, and cultural transfer. Each dimension was examined independently and then interpreted relationally, allowing the study to identify



points of convergence between financial practices, diplomatic strategies, and cultural transformations. This approach makes it possible to move beyond a fragmented reading of British presence and to capture its systemic character.

Special attention was given to the urban and cultural dimension, particularly in the case of Bogotá. Architectural transformations, the emergence of social clubs, and changes in elite sociability were analysed as indicators of cultural influence. These elements were interpreted not as isolated imitations, but as part of a broader process through which Colombian elites negotiated modernity and international belonging.

Finally, this methodological design allows for a historically grounded analysis that recognises the limitations of the available sources. The study does not claim to offer an exhaustive account of all British activities in Colombia; rather, it seeks to provide a coherent and theoretically informed interpretation of the most significant patterns of influence. In doing so, the article contributes to the historiographical debate on informal empire and dependent modernization from a Colombian perspective.

## Results

### Economic Influence

British economic influence in nineteenth-century Colombia was primarily articulated through trade relations, foreign credit, and direct investment in strategic sectors (Urrutia, 2002; Kalmanovitz, 1985). Following independence, the Colombian state faced structural fiscal weakness and limited domestic capital accumulation, conditions that facilitated the entry of British financial actors. Loans contracted in London became a central mechanism through which British influence was consolidated, particularly during the early republican period (Avella, 2007).

The circulation of British capital was closely linked to Colombia's integration into the Atlantic economy. Imports of manufactured goods from Britain increased steadily, while Colombian exports (such as gold

and tobacco) were channelled through commercial networks dominated by British merchants (McFarlane, 1993).

This asymmetrical trade structure reinforced Colombia's position as a supplier of raw materials and a consumer of industrial products, limiting the development of domestic manufacturing (Bulmer-Thomas, 2003).

Investment in infrastructure further illustrates the dual character of British economic influence. British capital played a decisive role in the financing of railways, mining enterprises, navigation companies, and urban public services (Kalmanovitz, 1985; Urrutia, 2002). While these projects contributed to economic modernization, they were largely oriented toward export activities rather than internal market integration, a pattern characteristic of dependent modernization (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979).

### Diplomatic Networks

Diplomatic networks constituted a second key dimension through which British influence was exercised in Colombia. Rather than relying on coercive power, Britain deployed a dense web of diplomats, commercial agents, and political intermediaries who mediated relations between London and Bogotá (McFarlane, 1998). These actors played a crucial role in negotiating loans, securing commercial privileges, and protecting British economic interests.

Colombian diplomatic representatives abroad also shaped this relationship. As López Méndez's missions illustrate, early republican diplomacy was deeply tied to the search for international recognition and financial support (Bushnell, 1993). These negotiations were marked by structural asymmetries, as Colombia's urgent need for external credit limited its bargaining capacity (Avella, 2007).

Analysis of diplomatic correspondence and legislative debates reveals that British influence extended into domestic political discussions. Trade policies, customs regulations, and infrastructure concessions were frequently aligned with British interests, demonstrating that diplomacy functioned as a



mechanism of economic penetration rather than neutral interstate exchange (McFarlane, 1992; Kalmanovitz, 1985).

### **Cultural Transfer**

Cultural transfer represented the third and less visible dimension of British influence in nineteenth-century Colombia. Beyond trade and diplomacy, British presence reshaped social practices, urban life, and elite identities, particularly in Bogotá (Barriga Monroy, 2013). Cultural influence operated through symbolic representations and the selective appropriation of foreign models perceived as markers of modernity (Chartier, 1994).

Urban space emerged as a privileged site of cultural transfer. Architectural styles, planning principles, and public institutions reflected European (and especially British) inspiration (Barriga Monroy, 2013). These transformations embodied ideals of order, hygiene, and progress that were actively embraced by Colombian elites as signs of civilisation (McFarlane, 1998).

Elite sociability further reinforced these processes. Clubs, leisure practices, and social norms associated with British culture functioned as mechanisms of distinction and international identification (Bourdieu, 1984). Although these practices were selectively adapted, they contributed to the legitimisation of British influence by embedding it in everyday social life.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study suggest that British influence in nineteenth-century Colombia cannot be understood through a single lens. Rather than operating exclusively in the economic or diplomatic spheres, British presence unfolded as a connected process in which financial practices, political negotiations, and cultural models reinforced one

another overtime. This interconnectedness helps explain the depth and persistence of British influence despite the absence of formal colonial control.

From an economic perspective, British capital undeniably contributed to Colombia's modernization. Investments in infrastructure, access to international markets, and fiscal support provided the young republic with tools that were otherwise unavailable. Yet modernization did not occur on neutral terms. As dependency theorists have long argued, integration into the global economy often benefits external actors more than local ones (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). In the Colombian case, British investment strengthened export-oriented sectors while leaving domestic industrial development largely untouched, confirming the limits of this model (Kalmanovitz, 1985).

Diplomacy played a decisive role in sustaining this economic arrangement. Rather than acting as a space of equal negotiation, diplomatic relations reflected Colombia's structural vulnerabilities. The search for international recognition and financial stability pushed Colombian representatives into negotiations marked by asymmetry, where British interests carried greater weight (Bushnell, 1993). In this sense, diplomacy did not simply accompany economic influence; it helped translate financial dependency into long-term political and institutional patterns.

The cultural dimension reveals perhaps the most subtle, yet enduring, form of influence. British models of urban organisation, sociability, and everyday conduct were not imposed, but selectively adopted by Colombian elites who associated them with progress and modernity (Barriga Monroy, 2013). These cultural choices mattered. They shaped how elites understood development, civilisation, and international belonging, and in doing so, they legitimised British presence beyond material considerations.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate why informal empire proved to be such an effective form of power. British influence relied less on coercion and more on consent, aspiration, and structural dependence. The Colombian experience thus reinforces the idea that informal empire operated through



everyday practices and shared assumptions as much as through markets and diplomacy.

## Conclusion

This article has explored British influence in nineteenth-century Colombia by examining how economic ties, diplomatic relations, and cultural exchanges interacted to shape the country's post-independence trajectory. By using the concepts of informal empire and dependent modernization, the study has shown that British presence extended well beyond commerce, affecting political decision-making, urban development, and elite identities.

British economic involvement offered Colombia important opportunities for integration into the global economy, providing capital and access to international trade networks. At the same time, these opportunities came with clear constraints. Dependence on foreign credit and export-oriented growth limited Colombia's ability to define its own development path (Kalmanovitz, 1985; Urrutia, 2002). Modernization, therefore, unfolded alongside persistent external dependence.

Diplomatic relations reinforced this outcome. The need for recognition and financial support shaped Colombia's international strategy, often narrowing the space for autonomous decision-making. While formal sovereignty remained intact, effective autonomy was frequently compromised, revealing the complex nature of power in post-independence international relations.

Cultural transfer completed this picture. The adoption of British-inspired urban forms, social practices, and cultural references reflected a desire to belong to a global modernity. These choices were neither passive nor accidental, but they played a crucial role in normalizing British influence and embedding it within everyday social life.

In conclusion, the Colombian case illustrates how informal empire functioned as a flexible and enduring system of power. British influence was exercised without direct rule, yet it profoundly shaped Colombia's economic structures, political practices, and cultural horizons. Recognizing this historical experience helps illuminate the long-term roots of dependency and inequality in Latin America and invites reflection on how global power continues to operate in less visible, but deeply influential, ways.

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